Organization, Geography of

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Abstract

The geography of organization denotes the interdisciplinary study of the spatial aspects of organizations and processes of organizing. Geography as well as organization and management studies are the major fields to contribute to this area. Three major strands of research can be distinguished. One focuses on 'organizations in space' and how organizational action transforms space and vice versa. The second one looks inside organizations and is interested in how space shapes organizational life. The third one moves away from the organization as an entity but rather centers on how processes of organizing create emergent sociomaterial orders.

The geography of organization refers to the interdisciplinary study of the spatial aspects of organizations and processes of organizing. It analyzes how space and organization interact and shape each other. 'Organization' in the singular is the term that encompasses both 'organizations' – associations of human and nonhuman elements that are meant to work toward specific goals – as well as 'organizing' – the practices of establishing these associations. The term 'institution,' by contrast, which can sometimes be found in the geographical literature as a synonym for organization, is reserved for the dominant understanding in political science that sees institutions as the formal and informal rules that structure social and political behavior.

The intersection of space and organizations has grown in importance due to the proliferation of organizations worldwide and their rising significance in all aspects of contemporary societies. At the same time, processes of globalization and attendant time-space compression have also altered the role of space for organizational activities. Rather than a discernible field *sui generis*, the geography of organization is more a shared interest in some common themes. Major contributions to studying the geography of organization have originated from human geography as well as from organization and management studies. Both fields have experienced a surging interest in space and organization, respectively, in the 2000s (in organization and management studies, for example, Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Hernes, 2004; in geography Müller, 2012; Philo and Parr, 2000).

For a long time, the implicit division of labor between geography on the one hand and organization and management studies on the other was such that geography focused on 'organizations in space,' treating the organization as a black box, whereas organization and management studies were interested in 'space in organizations,' however, often ignoring what was going on outside the organization. Organization and management scholars studied the role of space for activities in organizations, whereas geographers tended to be interested in the external implications of the activities of organizations for space. This division has become blurred with the embrace of poststructuralist approaches that are concerned with organizing in a broader sense than with organizations as discernible units. This article brings together the literature from the two fields, charting the major lines of flight and exploring commonalities and differences. In so doing, it also seeks to tap the potential for closer dialog for two literatures that have hitherto often followed rather separate trajectories.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three major different social theoretical perspectives have characterized work on the geography of organizations: positivism, critical realism, and poststructuralism. Table 1 provides a schematic overview for a rough first orientation, although it should be acknowledged that the boundaries often blur.

Table 1 Major theoretical perspectives on the geography of organization

	Positivism	Critical realism	Poststructuralism
Approaches	Spatial science	Institutionalism	Discourse theory
	Functionalism	Structuration	Practice theory
	Rational choice	Critical theory	Actor-network theory Embodiment
Organization	Discrete, bounded entity	Embedded entity	Temporarily fixed, constructed entity
Ambition	Mapping the organization	Contextualizing the organization	Deconstructing organization
Key question	What are the spatial patterns of organizational relationships?	How is the organization related to its socioeconomic context?	How is organization as a precarious order maintained and subverted across space?
Methods	Descriptive and inferential statistics	Structured and open interviews	Participant observation
	GIS	Participant observation	Open interviews
	Survey research	Descriptive statistics	Text analysis
			Visual analysis

Adapted from Del Casino Jr., V., Grimes, A.J., Hanna, S.P., Jones III, J.P., 2000. Methodological frameworks for the geography of organizations. Geoforum 31, 523–538.

The positivist understanding sees organizations as bounded, discrete units with a fixed membership and a defined set of rules. Going back to Weber (1922), it stresses the organization as an ordered and stable entity with predictable routines and rules. It is most interested in the spatial patterns of organizational relationships, either in the organization itself or with its environment, and is associated with approaches such as spatial science and rational choice. This perspective can be descriptive, mapping spatial patterns, but it can also be explanatory, trying to predict spatial patterns through organizational variables or vice versa. While dominant until the 1970s, not least fueled by the quantitative revolution of the 1960s, the positivist perspective has lost ground since then with turns toward social and critical theory in both geography and organization and management studies.

The critical realist perspective dissolves the assumption of the boundedness of organizations in favor of viewing them as linked up with wider social, economic, and political structures. The actions of organizations thus cannot be studied without taking into account the relations with their surrounding. This understanding owes much to Granovetter's (1985) notion of embeddedness, but also to Giddens' (1984) structuration theory that privileges neither structural nor agential explanations of organizational action. Veering away from the quantitative description and explanation of spatial patterns, the critical realist perspective increasingly employs qualitative methods such as semistructured interviews in addition to quantitative methods. It has been particularly useful for conceptualizing the relationship between the organization as an actor and space as the variable context in which it is embedded and enjoys particular popularity in economic geography.

The poststructuralist understanding moves from a focus on 'the organization' as entity to 'organization' as a temporarily fixed but in general ephemeral effect of the process of organizing. It is thus more interested in the becoming than in the being of organization and in the processes that bring about organization in the first place. It was Weick (1979) who pioneered this shift in attention in the studies of organization with his focus on the 'enactment' of organization. This perspective sees organization as unbounded in time and space: it is an emergent phenomenon, multiple, and amorphous. Deconstructing how this precarious order is temporarily stabilized or subverted is the central ambition of such a poststructuralist perspective that draws on a range of thinkers from Foucault to Deleuze, Latour, and Lefebvre. It has been the driving force behind the spatial turn in organization and management studies since the 2000s and has also enjoyed increasing popularity in geography with the reception of more-than-representational forms of theorizing and the concomitant focus on embodiment. However, it also encompasses variants of discourse analysis that concentrate on the meaning-making in and of organizations and thus on the semiotic side of social life.

Types of Organizations

The types of organizations that are studied in the geography of organization vary greatly. Organization and management studies as well as economic geography are most interested in firms as pivotal actors in the modern economy. In organization and management studies, this empirical focus is related to the common affiliation of the field with business schools. Transnational Corporations (TNCs) have enjoyed particular attention in economic geography, because their far-flung, intricate global networks make them ideal cases to study the geography of organization. However, empirical interest has branched out in recent years to other organizations that partake in economic activity, such as trade unions, not-for-profit organizations or public administration, and service organizations.

Political geography devotes more attention to organizations involved in politics, whether that is institutionalized big P Politics or the small p politics of social agonism and contestation. While the state and its multiple organizational manifestations have been at the center of interest for a long time (see State, Geography of), other organizations such as international and transnational organizations, NGOs, grassroots movements, schools, or the church have broadened the array of actors that are studied. In social and cultural as well as in urban geography, the range of organizations encompasses the various aspects of public administration and service as well as social movements, neighborhood and community organizations, and NGOs. Here, some organizations also figure under the moniker of 'institutions,' in particular hospitals, asylums, schools, and so on.

Organizations in Space

Research on organizations in space asks how organizational action is mediated through and across space as well as how it transforms space and vice versa. This research area has attracted increasing attention not least due to the growing need of organizational processes to be coordinated across space in the wake of globalization, but also because of the major influence organizations have on spatial patterns of the economy. It is no surprise then that the role of organizations in space is a key ingredient in many geographical theories, in particular in economic geography. Storper's (1997) 'holy trinity' of technologies, organizations, and territories equates organizations with firms and production systems. He follows Coase in seeing the major rationale of organizations in reducing transaction costs. The main goal of organizations then is to internalize and coordinate action in the economy. To this end, organizations establish a system of rules to adhere to, thus creating conventions and relations over and above mere traded transactions. Bathelt and Glückler (2003), too, have organizations as one of their four ions of a relational economic geography, alongside interaction, innovation, and evolution. For them, organizations exist to coordinate economic inputs across an increasingly differentiated spatial division of economic activity in the world, while at the same time being embedded in local social, cultural, and institutional structures. It is this tension between the recursive relationship of organization and space that characterizes work on organizations in space.

Organizations Forming Space

One strand of research seeks to explain spatial patterns, whether economic, social, or political, through the study of

organizations and organizational structures. Organizations here figure as an alternative *explanans* to complement those of individual choice and capitalist market forces. Among others, scholars have discussed the influence of government organizations on such things as the patterns of agricultural activity, migration, political boundaries, natural resource exploitation, or industrial location (e.g., Flowerdew, 1982; Scott, 1998). A groundbreaking study of the way that organizations impact on geography is Selznick's (1949) *TVA and the Grass Roots*. It is an in-depth analysis of the organizational rationalities of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a government agency that was set up in 1933 to facilitate resource development and regional planning in that area and today is the largest regional planning association in the United States. Selznick considers how the TVA coopted local residents and organizations into its land use policy, which were to fundamentally transform the spatial pattern of the Tennessee Valley with the construction of multiple dams and navigation channels and the introduction of new agricultural and forest policies.

In economic geography, the geography of enterprises, or corporate geography, sought to relate the spatial patterns of economic activity to decision making in organizations. Corporate strategies, such as cost leadership or differentiation, or vertical and horizontal integration versus disintegration have an effect on the location and clustering of production activities and thus on regional economies. The large corporation with a centralized, hierarchical structure became the archetypal organization to be studied under this rubric. Yet, corporate geography came under fire for lacking proper theoretical foundation, having no additional explanatory power over the forces of market capitalism, and being too preoccupied with the single large corporation (Walker, 1989). As a response, scholarship moved to embrace the concept of the network, which recognized the increasing differentiation of organizational forms and the fraying boundaries of organizations (Dicken and Thrift, 1992). Enjoying considerable prominence in economic geography, a set of approaches has sought to conceptualize the spatially dispersed nature of the production of commodities and services in the global economy. Global production networks and global value chains seek to capture the flows that bind headquarters and subsidiaries or customers and suppliers together for the sourcing and distribution of products (Henderson et al., 2002). Yet again, however, the prominent concept of the lead firm, which coordinates and controls operations across several countries, focuses on one large corporation that has the power to manipulate global space.

Space forming Organizations

The relation between *explanans* and *explanandum* is inverted in the second strand of research which considers not the effects of organizations on space but that of space on organizations. It acknowledges that organizations do not exist as quasi-independent entities that are isolated from the space surrounding them (Dicken and Thrift, 1992). The central idea is that of the embeddedness of organizations, i.e., the influence of institutions outside the organization on organizational action (Hess, 2004). Here, the term institutional thickness has been used to describe an integrated web of institutions such as

enterprise support systems, political institutions, and social citizenship that create a shared sense of purpose and synergies of interaction between organizations.

In what has become known as the 'new regionalism' the institutional thickness of regions as well as the close proximity of organizations to each other is thought to grant a competitive edge to firms located there. This assumption is captured in a range of concepts such as the cluster, learning region, creative milieu, or industrial district, which are assumed to enhance interorganizational trust and boost learning and innovation in organizations located there. This spatial proximity between organizations is considered of particular importance for the exchange of tacit knowledge, which is at the heart of many innovation processes. Saxenian's (1996) comparison of the Silicon Valley with the Boston Route 128 cluster, for example, attributes the comparative success of Silicon Valley precisely to the presence of advantageous regional effects on organizational action. Geographers have celebrated this new regionalism as signifying the continued importance of space for organizational success, despite predictions of the death of distance in the age of globalization.

Producing Spatial Representations

A third sense in which organizations are involved in space relates to the production of representations of space. This strand of research starts from the assumption that organizations created shared symbolic meanings of spaces. Studies in this vein tend to operate with the concept of discourse or other semiotic approaches and are concerned with how language attaches differential meaning to space, which, in turn, might influence social action. Some pinpoint single organizations, such as government agencies, the EU, or the media, while others examine the representations produced by a multitude of different organizations but with respect to the same spatial category, such as 'Eastern Europe' or 'Africa.' An illustrative example of this category is the analysis of organizational discourses in the wake of 9/11 (Dahlman and Brunn, 2003). The study makes the case for recognizing NGOs as "important agents in the production of ideational content and the circulation of contemporary global visions and political (re)orderings" (p. 256). On the basis of press releases and public statements immediately after 9/11 from a broad variety of 23 organizations, ranging from the WWF to the World Bank, the IOC, and the World Council of Churches, the authors perform a discourse analysis of the spatial framing of the terrorist events.

Space in Organizations

For a long time, geography has been interested in the effects and rules that organizations produce, which is reflected through the frequent use of the term 'institution.' The mechanisms and processes of rule production within organizations, however, have tended to escape scrutiny. This predicament of treating the organization as a black box has drawn increasing critique in different geographical subdisciplines, provoking calls to examine and theorize what is going on inside organizations (Müller, 2012; Taylor and Asheim, 2001). This kind of

research has been the staple of organization and management studies. Space, however, did not explicitly appear on its agenda until the 2000s. When it made its entry, it happened with a flourish, prompting talk about a 'spatial turn' in the discipline and even attempts at rethinking organization through space, since "any act of organizing is about creating a space for human action and interaction" (Hernes, 2004: 11).

Ordering Space

Much of the concern with space in organizations has revolved around how the ordering of space can become a source of power. Work in this tradition often connects to critical management studies in highlighting how management can produce unequal and exploitative relations. Foucault and Lefebvre act as the major sources of theoretical inspiration. For Foucault, "discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space … [it] organizes an analytical space" (Foucault, 1979[1975]: 141, 145), a dictum that he exemplified in his work on the prison as a panopticon and on schools as forming docile bodies. What has attracted most attention in Lefebvre's work is the dialectic of the spatial triad of conceived space (*le conçu*), perceived space (*le perçu*), and lived space (*le vécu*) (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]). Conceived space corresponds more or less to Foucault's idea of space: the spatial order that relations of production impose, expressed in plans, calculations, and models. Perceived space refers to spatial practices and the everyday appropriation of space through routines and rituals that reproduce space. Lived space, finally, represents the dynamic element, in which opportunities for difference and subversion arise that overflow the rigid spatial models of conceived space.

At the center of attention is the question of how space shapes organizational life and vice versa. The stress falls on the material aspects of space, or physical space, as it manifests itself in office layouts or the architecture of buildings (Dale and Burrell, 2008; van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). This (re-)discovery of material space in organization and management studies is often phrased as engaging in a dialog with the discipline of architecture rather than that of geography (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). This might be because geography, until recently, has rather sought to overcome the notion of physical space, emphasizing the constructedness and malleability of space. Claims about how space shapes organizational functions stir unpleasant memories of geographical determinism with geographers.

This strand of research examines how the material spaces in an organization are often enlisted to increase control over staff, enhance productivity, or save costs under the disguise of a rhetoric of making office space more livable and worker-friendly. An example is the enchantment of modern management with open plan offices, which have done away with walls in office buildings. The intention of open plan offices is to buttress information exchange and communication and increase the identification with the organization. At the same time, it also facilitates surveillance of staff through placing people and screens in plain view of the panoptic gaze. The original intentions of this conceived space – to follow Lefebvre's terminology – are often subverted, however, in the everyday practices of the social appropriation of it. Workers sometimes improvise makeshift partitions between workplaces with files and books or use earplugs to escape the constant background noise of the office. The continuous circulation of people, fueled through policies of hot-desking, often contributes to social withdrawal rather than to the desired social integration and exchange. In this sense, conceived space does not determine organizational life, but there is a recursive relationship in which its social appropriation leads to initially unintended effects.

Folding Space

While the research on ordering space makes much of distances and spatial partitioning, research on folding space takes the opposite tack: it is interested in how large physical distances are reduced to become small. Such an approach owes much to actor-network theory (ANT) and Serres and Latour's (1995) notion of topological space, where distance is a function of the length of a relation between two elements and as such not pre-given. Latour and Serres use this metaphor of 'folding space' to liken space to a handkerchief which can be folded and crumpled so that two points that were distant in the beginning end up close together. For example, I can be further away from the colleague who sits in the next cubicle but works for a different department than from a collaborator who works thousands of kilometers away but who is on my Skype list. The possibilities of folding space in organizations have increased with new channels of communication such as e-mail and social media, which allow people to feel connected and develop a form of sociality across vast physical distances, as well as with cheaper long-distance travel (see Globalization, Geographical Aspects). We thus increasingly find teams that are not co-located but rather work on the same project from different locations across the world.

The notion of folding space is of particular relevance for organizational arrangements where elements from different locations need to come together to produce organizational action. This empirical phenomenon has been captured in concepts such as that of the 'community of practice' and others that revolve around a distanciated sociology of learning (Amin and Cohendet, 2004: Chapter 5). In communities of practice, knowledge is created and passed on in relationships between people, and learning occurs through repeated interaction. "What allows members [of communities of practice] to share knowledge is not the choice of a specific form of communication … but the existence of a shared practice – a common set of situations, problems and perspectives" (Wenger et al., 2002: 25). Communities of practice therefore do not have to consist of localized individuals, but can be made up of a network of individuals dispersed around the globe that are nevertheless tied together through common relations. This assumption of knowledge relations stretched over long distances complements but does not supplant that of the territorial embeddedness of learning and innovation, which stresses the importance of spatial proximity.

Organizations have an active part to play in this folding of space, for the stretching and maintenance of relations over long distances requires much effort. Organizations provide the informational infrastructure, be it e-mail, wikis, intranets, project management software, or video conferencing

equipment, but also facilitate the moving of human bodies between places through business travel. Forms and documents of all manners act as intermediaries between different locations, since they can be moved easily, and help align organizational action. But organizations also create a shared practice through orienting staff toward a common goal, establishing formal and informal codes of conduct and social practices – often referred to as organizational culture. Examining how those relations across distance are established and maintained, what kind of organizational action they result in, and where they break down is the key interest of research in this mold. For that purpose, researchers often adopt a research strategy of 'following the thing,' reconstructing the networks people and things weave as they move from place to place and enroll new elements for organizational action.

Organizing Space

Emerging with a turn toward poststructuralist theorizing, the *process* of organizing has attracted increasing attention. This has implied a move away from the organization as a self-enclosed entity and distinctive focus of research, broadening the empirical scope of interest and also the possibilities for convergence between geography and organization and management studies. The central question here is how organization as a precarious order is maintained and subverted across space. 'Organizing' thus is often used as a synonym for 'ordering,' i.e., arranging things and people for a certain amount of time. This shift foregrounds the spontaneous, ad hoc character of organization and how it is actualized in social practices. For Thrift and Olds (1996: 319–320), four implications result from this shift. First, organization is improvised and tentative and not as goal-oriented and purposive as much of the literature has tended to assume. Organizational action has a haphazard character and affords a rather partial view of the world. Second, organization is constituted in action and talked into being and thus needs continued maintenance, rather than existing as an unproblematic a priori. Third, organization is always open and has fuzzy boundaries, bringing in new elements, while discarding others at the same time. Fourth, certain interactional structures are linked to organizational forms that cannot be adequately described with the existing notion of the organization. This applies, for example, to the precarious and dispersed nature of projects and social movements.

For the theoretical underpinning of this understanding of organizing, research has turned to inspiration from a heterogeneous range of authors such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari, actor-network theorists such as Latour, and phenomenologists such as Spinoza. Three ideas can be highlighted as central. One is that of the *performativity* of organizing, whereby organization is enacted through repetitive practice. This calls for a shift of attention to the mundane practices through which organization is brought into being at the level of the individual, which is in tune with the budding interest in theories of practice. It reverses the idea that organizations give rise to certain actions, claiming that instead actions constitute organization. This assumption is encapsulated in Kafka's often-cited fragmentary novel *Der Prozeß*, where the very actions of the protagonist K. give birth to the trial and the court at which it is pursued in the first place.

The second idea is that of taking *materiality* seriously, both in the sense of giving more weight to things and to the corporeality of the human body and its senses. The claim that 'things matter' recognizes that organization is a sociomaterial accomplishment, in which things – whether mundane such as partition walls or complex such as software – often provide the cohesive glue to make organizational arrangements durable at least for some time. For Latour, for example, technology is society made durable and in his concept of agencements (assemblages) Deleuze equally insists that the combination of social *and* material elements creates action. This insight breaks with the tradition of seeing organizations as associations of individuals and skirting over the role of the material world, which often served as a mere backdrop. Grappling with the specific materiality of the human body involves treating it as a living organism with all the senses and forces that work through it. Giving due attention to affects such as fear or desire calls the concept of the rational, calculating individual into question, but at the same time opens up new perspectives on what makes organization durable across space or fall apart. However, it also throws up challenges about the research methods with which to approach such phenomena as affect, which often seem to be too elusive to be captured in interviews, for example.

Multiplicity, a notion at the heart of Deleuze's thought, is the third central idea of research on the processes of organizing space and refers to the precarious, contingent nature of organization, in which arrangements could always be otherwise. It thus has an avowedly political component in that it affirms the openness of the current state of affairs to political contestation, since there is no natural, generative order of things. A concern with organizing thus goes lockstep with an interest in how orders are always temporary and subverted, how power is necessarily limited and much escapes its structuring effect and how creativity is at work in unexpected places. But it also implicates an ethical call for the researcher to abandon a position of purportedly detached observation to engage in what has been called ontological politics, i.e., to think about the worlds we want to help make through our research.

Such efforts to push the boundaries of research on the geography of organization have gelled into studies that sweep across a broad range of empirical territory. They have encompassed a reliving of the riveting experience of slow-motion video as a corporeal sensitization for the minutiae of affect in everyday life (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012) or the development of new sensitivities for the experiential spaces of a voluntary welfare agency, with their fleeting and affective encounters (Conradson, 2003). The established boundaries between geographers and scholars of organization and management studies have increasingly become erased and transgressed in the course of this and there is increasing recognition of each other's work. Yet much remains to be done in the years to come to bring the conceptual promises and ambitions of this research direction to full empirical fruition.

See also: Administration in Organizations; Networks, Geography of; Organization: Overview; Organizations, Sociology of; People in Organizations.

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