ORGANIZATIONS, Spring 2010
920:524:01
920:492:04
A-256 Lucy Stone Hall, Livingston Campus
Mondays 4:10-6:50

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I have two main goals in this course. The first is to survey basic issues in organizational theory. The second is to analyze some of the key current topics and arguments in social scientific thinking on organizations and organizationally relevant issues. “Organizationally relevant” means this: there are a lot of important debates and currents of thought in social science that depend in one way or another on organizations. For example, micro-level analyses about how people make choices among jobs must take account of how organizations set the menu of choices from which they choose. Or, to take a macro example: it’s not possible to understand how western culture shapes prevailing conceptions of rationality without understanding how organizational politics gave rise to those conceptions, and defeated others.

It is almost always a waste of time to lecture in graduate courses. Because this course is a seminar, it is important that everyone participate in the discussions. It will be impossible to participate intelligently without having done the reading, so please do it before the class in which we’ll be discussing it. As a device to facilitate discussion, a discussion leader (or leaders) will assume primary responsibility for leading the discussion. Leaders should prepare a set of crucial questions about the readings for the day. Regardless of whose week it is to lead discussion, everyone is responsible for reading the material. We will arrange the schedule on the first day of class. I’ll also give some tips on how to digest what might appear to be a large amount of material.

There are 3 requirements for the course. First is participation. Second, there are two short (3 pages maximum length) critical analyses, the dates of which appear below. I will give you some guidelines on how to do a good critical analysis; I’ll also show you an example. Last is a proposal, paper, or chapter. I am flexible about this, so that students have a choice that will work best with their intellectual agenda. Of course, the specific topic can be of your own choosing, but you should clear it with me first. If your proposal is built upon or might feed into a dissertation proposal, please see me before developing it. Toward the end of the course, you will present your work to the class, for friendly, constructive feedback.

I don’t give incompletes.

The following books are required, and are available at the Livingston Bookstore. All are in paper, and will be cheap:

• Gerald F. Davis, Managed by the Markets: How Finance Re-Shaped America, Oxford University Press, 2009
• Dana Britton, At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization, NYU Press.

There are also readings. I’ve put the readings on Sakai.

Generally, the naming convention I used is lastname_significant word.pdf. So, for example, the first reading is entitled “weber_bureaucracy.pdf.”

We’ll talk about how to get the other readings on the 1st day of class.

A few of the readings are Word documents. Let me know if that’s a problem for you and I’ll send it to you in another format. Most are PDF files.

List of readings, by week.

1. January 25. Introductions. The relevance of organizational analysis; importance of the perspective; place of organizational sociology in the field. Why I chose the books, and so on.

2. February 1. Some fundamentals

Here the point is to flesh out what it means to say “organizational analysis,” while giving some intellectual history along the way.

• NB: You are not required to read the following, but they’re good to know: Was there a Hawthorne effect?, Stephen R.G. Jones, AJS, 1992, 98(3):451-468. Worker interdependence and output: the Hawthorne studies reevaluated, ASR, 1990, 176-190.
• Neil Flinkstein, Organizations: Theoretical debates and the scope of organizational theory, Handbook of Sociology.
3. February 8. What makes organizations do what they do? The institutionalist answer. Usual answers to that question involve efficiency or some other functional reason that makes sense. These authors come up with other answers altogether, and it matters for what organizations look like and how they act. Of course, all theories leave out things so be on the lookout for what is missed here.


Other relevant readings, not required for class but key to further understanding the institutional perspective:

- Frank Dobbin and Erin L. Kelly, How to stop harassment: professional construction of legal compliance in organizations, AJS, 1007, 112(4):1203-1243.
4. February 15. Gender is everywhere. So is organization. Here’s a clever place that they meet. Dana Britton, At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization, NYU Press.

5. February 22. Organizational contexts & social networks
More arguments about the social structures that shape people’s life chances in various ways. Consider the continuities with Martin’s work. Look at the trust writings in that light.

- Neil Fligstein and Peter Brantley Bank control, owner control, or organizational dynamics: who controls the large modern corporation?, AJS, 1992, 98(2), 280-307
- Trust

- First critical essay due this week.

6. March 1. New Organizational Forms
- Arthur Stinchcombe, Social structure and organizations, Handbook of Organizations.

7. March 8. Organizational and System Performance
Is there anything organizations can say about the recent economic meltdown? Gerald Davis thinks so:

- Managed by the Markets: How Finance Re-Shaped America, Gerald F. Davis, Oxford University Press, 2009

8. March 22. Accidents, Mistakes, and Chance
- Lee Clarke, Max Headroom and the Efficiency Worshippers, Sociological Forum.
- Columbia Accident Investigation Board, Chapter 7, “The accident’s organizational causes,” and Chapter 8, “History as Cause”:

9. March 29. Organizational Performance: Success and Failure
- James B. Stewart, Eight Days, New Yorker.

10. April 5. Moral Games in Organizations (what is a game, anyway?)
11. April 12. Organizations and inequality
A huge amount of the important stratification in modern society happens inside and because of organizations. Yet they are often neglected. Here we wonder what purchase is gained by bringing organizational analysis to bear in inequalities, and vice versa.


Extra relevant readings
- Mark Granovetter, Labor markets and establishment size, ASR, 1984, 49(3)
- The social organization of the American business elite, Michael Useem, ASR, 1979, 44(4)
- Pathways to top corporate management, Michael Useem and Jerome Karabel, ASR, 1986, 51(2)

12. April 19. Organizational production of culture
The fundamental point here is that organizations make and use symbols. But what are the mechanisms? Why do they make the symbols as they do? What are the alternative
arguments? Extra credit for anyone who can identify the connections with classical organization theory.


13. April 26. Special topics: what does organizational analysis have to say about 9.11 and the response to 9.11?

- Richard Clarke, Evacuate the White House, Ch. 1 of Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror, Free Press, 2004.
- Nafeez Mossadq Ahmed, Chapter 5, The Collapse of Standard Operating Procedures on 9-11, in The War on Freedom: How and Why America was Attacked, September 11, 2001. This one is available as a web page.
- Graham Allison, Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis, American Political Science Review, 1969, 63(3):689-718