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Abstract

In this essay, we propose that recent work in management and organization studies is typically inclined to understand organization and organizing as dialogic in form. Dialogicity is characterized by dynamic interlocution on the part of active human sense-makers and, in our critical reading, evokes a romanticized social landscape that fails to reflect the more prosaic features of organizational life. To address what we see as certain limitations of the dialogic view, we introduce a complementary point of reference: that of monologic organization. This perspective provokes reflection on those situations in which meanings are predetermined at the outset and communication consists of the strictly controlled, routine reproduction of formal scripts. We draw on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Serres to reclaim monologic as a pertinent view of organization and its processes. Finally, we provide micro-, meso- and macro-level examples to illustrate and discuss the heuristic potential of a monologic view.

Keywords

analysis, Bakhtin, communication, dialogue, monologue, participation, Serres

Introduction

In this essay, we problematize the dominant construal of organization and organizing in dialogic terms and introduce a complementary point of reference: that of *monologic organization*. Recent work in management and organization studies is typically inclined to understand both organization and the act of organizing as entailing processes that are ‘polyvocal’, ‘polyphonic’ and ‘multi-authored’ (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Glozer, Caruana, & Hibbert, 2019; Shotter, 2008); Tsoukas

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& Chia, 2002). From this vantage point, organization is essentially dialogic in form and profoundly dynamic, propelled by highly active human sense-makers (Introna, 2019). As illustrated by, to name two examples, research into communication (e.g. Schoeneborn et al., 2014) and narrative (e.g. Boje, 2001), the notion of a multiplicity of voices, and of a dialogue between them, has become a favoured organizational image within organizational research, as well as a paradigm for recent theorizing (e.g. Atkin & Hassard, 1996). We do not suggest that all research in organization studies falls into this category. However, we do claim that the centre of gravity in recent theorizing strongly and one-sidedly leans towards a dialogic perspective.

While the dialogic view aptly captures the dynamic meaning-making that plays out between heterogeneous and empowered subjects, it is not so well equipped, we contend, to describe mechanized, unified and agency-deprived organizational and societal contexts. Evoking an essentially romanticized social landscape, the dialogic perspective inadvertently presumes that every act of organizing involves actors who are actively engaging in an interchange of ideas. As evocative and attractive as this dialogic image may be, it fails adequately to explain more prosaic features that are typical of how people often organize, and are organized, features that today may be masked by a dialogic front of ‘conversation’, ‘community’, ‘participation’ or ‘consultation’. We go against the grain of current fashions in organization studies by pointing to the limitations of polyvocality and drawing attention to monologic features of organization. *Monologic organization* – forms of organizing that speak *at* people, not *with* people¹ – provides an equally rich alternative to the dialogic perspective by making intelligible those situations in which meanings are predetermined at the outset, and communication consists of the strictly controlled, routine reproduction of formal scripts or of unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions.

We begin by briefly exploring the underlying assumptions of what we characterize as a dialogic perspective. Specifically, we discuss three dominating features of dialogicity in the context of organization theory: plurality, reciprocity and liquidity. In order to create analytic sensitivity to non-dialogic features of organization, we first draw on the classic work of Mikhail Bakhtin to inform our understanding of the relationship between dialogic and monologic organization. Whereas Bakhtin’s original distinction begets a certain balance between dialogic and monologic forms of communication, we want to make a stand for ‘monologue’ and ‘dialogue’ as different images of organization inspiring different ways of seeing and analysing. This provides the grounds for analysing bodies of work developed predominantly in line with the dialogic view, such as, that associated with the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective. Having established the limitations of the dialogic perspective, we then propose *monologic organization* as an alternative image for understanding the (lack of) dynamics in semantically immobile or structurally bureaucratic organizational frameworks. To augment our argument in this respect, we also introduce theories developed by Serres (1982a) by way of reclaiming monologic as a pertinent view on organization and its processes. Finally, we provide micro-, meso- and macro-level examples – pertaining, respectively, to (1) experience of ostensibly creative work rendered artless, (2) spiritual organization and (3) an authoritarian political regime – in order to discuss the heuristic potential of a monologic view. In short, we suggest a repositioning of the dialogic perspective by promoting a reinvigorated notion of monologic as a complementary guiding lens for studying social organization in different registers and at varying levels of scale.

Three Tenets of a Dialogic Perspective

Recent decades have witnessed a blossoming of explanatory frameworks for understanding organizations and management. Quite how we arrived at a status quo that privileges dialogue as a dominant perspective for both the descriptive and normative understanding of organization is an

interesting question. Our conjecture is that one way of understanding its origins is to view its emergence against the backdrop of post-World War II political dynamics. Cold War politics led to a geopolitical standoff between the democratic principles of what we now think of as liberal democracy and, as positioned by Western powers, the freedom-stifling autocracy of the Soviet Union and Maoist Communism of a newly formed People's Republic of China. The values of purportedly democratic systems made space for, and normatively privileged *dialogue* in contrast to single party authoritarianism that actively suppressed any talking back, so to speak. At least this was the Western *discourse* during this period; a discourse which ultimately 'prevailed' with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the establishment of what was hailed in the late 1980s as the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 2004) and geopolitical developments that some celebrated as the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992).

It was within this political climate and context, we contend, that dialogism in the fields of organization studies and organization theory began to emerge and flourish.

What are the central tenets of a dialogic perspective? First, dialogism frames our social world in terms of a *plurality* of voices and *reciprocity* in the interactional dynamics between actors. Organizations are construed as 'polyvocal', 'multi-storied' (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007), 'multi-authored' (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), 'polyphonic' (Gergen & Whitney, 1996; Hazen, 1993) or 'heteroglossic' (Rhodes, 2000, 2001). From this vantage point, organization is an ongoing production of social meanings which emerges from interactions between actors (Boje, Gephart, & Thatchenkery, 1996) whose multiple voices fill the social space (Boje, 2014). Hence, the plurality comes from the numbers of contributors to the discussion, increasing the number of viewpoints. The reader of organizational realities becomes an interpreter of those voices, dialogues and conversations (Rosenau, 1992) in which texts exist, and 'penetrate' one another (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1237), in perpetual and unending dialogue (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 239). This process is construed as a *reciprocal* interchange of ideas and opinions (Schoeneborn et al., 2014; Serva, Fuller, & Mayer, 2005; Swärd, 2016).

Even the absence of plurality – e.g. in the case of a non-diverse workforce or an autocratic management regime – does not seem to inhibit the claim that multiple voices are present; in fact, it may be reaffirmed in, for instance, a critique of the exclusion of dialogue or diversity and the perceived need to encourage it (Bradshaw, 1996; Hazen, 1993). In short, from a dialogic viewpoint (Belova, King, & Sliwa, 2008), organization is perceived as a nexus of inherently heterogeneous and reciprocal activities; a multiplicity of people interacting and exchanging ideas (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993).

If *plurality* and *reciprocity* are the first two (relational) tenets of dialogic organization, a third (spatio-temporal) tenet is *liquidity*. Organization is seen as an ongoing process of combining and recombining elements, creating an oscillation between order and disorder (Chia, 1996; Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005). Hence, organization is always on the move (Currie, 1998), liquid (Bauman, 2000) or in a state of 'becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Any attempt to introduce order will be matched by disorder, and 'the refusal of containment' within the pre-existing frame (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1999, p. 626). According to this view, moreover, organization is unpredictable and 'surprising' (Tsoukas, 1998, p. 292); it 'is not a proper formation of elements, but a funky combination of dis/orders' (Clegg et al., 2005, p. 154). Organizations, and their constitutive parts, are akin to semiotic layers of dialogic text. They are highly communicative and hyperactive, fearful of immobility. Such organizations are populated by hyper-agentive actors, who are constantly interacting, and capable of exercising volition in creating meanings. In no way are they recipients of pre-conceived contents; on the contrary, they co-create them (Saludadez & Taylor, 2006).

Liquidity is well illustrated in organization studies work that draws on the highly influential processual perspective on organizations (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008; Chia, 1996; Dawson,

1994; Nayak, 2008). This perspective seeks to capture the ‘moment that occurs [when] practices taken to be modern, are in the process of redefining themselves as something other’ (Clegg & Kornberger, 2003, p. 64). Consequently, processes – even if temporarily stabilized in structural forms – seemingly best inform our understanding of organization (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 281). Organizations, similar to dialogic texts, are understood as ‘processes in the making’ (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p. 1).

Taken together, from the premises of (1) plurality, (2) reciprocity and (3) liquidity emerges a dialogic perspective on organization, jointly becoming a de facto blueprint for how organization is to be understood. However, characterizing organization in terms of plurality, reciprocity and liquidity potentially leads one to overlook or discount contexts in which resources and opportunities for dialogical dynamism are scarce. As we intend to show, a dialogic perspective that renders organizations teeming with vibrant life and meaning is not neutral towards the role of organizational actors or the type of actions they engage in. More specifically, we argue, the dialogic perspective is relatively poorly equipped to understand the rationales, processes and power relations in mechanized, homogenized and agency-deprived organizations.

In the next section, we attempt to sensitize the reader to the possibilities of the non-dialogical by introducing Mikhail Bakhtin’s treatment of monologic and dialogic discourses. This discussion acts as a prelude to a subsequent consideration of the CCO perspective. While our intention is to inspire the field of organization studies beyond CCO specifically, this significant body of work serves our purposes well in terms of exemplifying the dialogic view within organization studies with which we wish to engage. This subsection, in turn, is followed by a discussion of Serres’ concept of *monologic communication* and our own formulation of *monologic organization*.

Monologic and Dialogic Discourses

In the field of organization studies, a Bakhtinian understanding of the dialogic form has become prominent (e.g. Boje, 1995; Czarniawska, 1999; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2002). For Bakhtin, ‘in the actual life of speech’ understanding is always active, prompting responsiveness that creates the ground for (‘engaged’) understanding enabling *dialogue* to emerge (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). A basic precondition for a ‘dialogue of voices’ to occur (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 285) is the multiplicity of social ‘languages’ – deriving from the roles assumed by speakers – that, when intertwined, amount to what Bakhtin calls ‘social heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 285). Heteroglossia (*raznorečie*) makes ‘almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 354). For Bakhtin, any linguistic markers (such as lexicality or semantics) are mere deposits of a certain ‘intentional process’ which imposes ‘specific conceptualizations’ upon them (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). The process in question thus goes well beyond linguistics – it is the essence of social life itself. According to Bakhtin, words themselves do not communicate meaning other than *conventionally*. It is exposure to ‘alien’ discourses and the willingness of the speaker to embed them in communication that makes the latter dialogically meaningful; or rather, meaningful at all, since as Bakhtin (1981, p. 292) advises:

To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined.

In Bakhtin’s conceptualization, ‘monologue’ and ‘monoglossia’ are on the other end of the spectrum, presented as the adverse anti-pole of dialogic discourse. In monologic discourse, listeners have a ‘purely receptive’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281) understanding of the speaker’s intention, merely

equating to the ‘reproduction of that which is already given’ (p. 281). Monologic discourse thus defies dialogue – it is ‘unitary’. It enables ‘correct language’ in the sense that well-established meanings stemming from ‘historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization’ are ‘posited’ (Bakhtin, p. 270). While Bakhtin construes the relation between the two in terms of a struggle and flux, rather than resolution (Bakhtin, 1984), monologic discourse is opposed to ‘the realities of heteroglossia’. It affords the subsumption of (unrealized) dialogic heteroglossia under an ‘ideologically unified and centralized’ set of meanings (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271).

It is this perception of the dialogic/monologic distinction that has gained traction in the field of organization studies. Bakhtin’s view of texts as dynamic, interactive, culturally shaped discourses inspired Julia Kristeva’s writings that have been responsible for introducing heteroglossia and intertextuality to a far wider social studies readership. Her insistence on the social and cultural backdrop of texts (Kristeva, 1980) provided a rationale for the semiotic re-reading of dialogicity. Indeed, the lineaments of dialogicity – plurality, liquidity, etc. – were translated into tropes of management and organization studies theory (cf. Letiche, 2010). A dialogical perspective on organizations and organizing, one that assumes a highly complex and dynamic social world propelled by dialogue between multiple actors, has become the authoritative, if not monologic voice in the field.

CCO: Dialogic Form Writ Large in Organization Theory

Heeding the spirit of understanding organization in dialogic terms (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009), the body of work designated as communicative constitution of organizations (Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2020; Saludadez & Taylor, 2006; Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019; Taylor & Van Every, 2000) exemplifies the dialogic perspective in the broader context of organization studies. Although, in principle, CCO is a suitable approach to address monologic organization and, indeed, some research in this tradition is not exclusively dialogic (e.g. Brummans et al., 2020), there tends to be a strong dialogic bias in it. Drawing on the spirit of dominant research conducted in the CCO realm will enable us, therefore, more clearly to present our argument by reversing some of its assumptions. To be clear, we do not suggest that the monologic perspective is precluded in CCO, rather that it is strongly underrepresented. We hope that our contribution in this essay may redress the balance, so to speak, and that our arguments evoke future lines of enquiry and research possibilities that the organization studies community (including, of course, colleagues working with CCO) might pursue.

Over the past two decades, CCO has become a popular model for analysing and understanding organizational interactions (Schoeneborn et al., 2019; Saludadez & Taylor, 2006) and its broader relevance to organization studies at large has been explicitly established (e.g. Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). According to CCO organization exists in and through communication, both becoming ‘variant expressions for the same reality’ (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996, p. 28). Organizations are realized, experienced and identified in communication processes (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). As organization emerges and perpetuates itself through related and overlapping communication events (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012), it extends the latter well beyond a transmission-focused perspective (Axley, 1984), emphasizing the ‘inherently dynamic, precarious, and ultimately indeterminate character’ of communication (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 304, also see Ashcraft et al., 2009). Since studying communication becomes a precondition to understanding organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), communicational modalities permeate both textual and conversational levels: while the former is characterized as ‘recurring, fairly stable and uneventful’ (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 20), the latter relates to evolving and co-constructive aspects of organization through dynamic interactions, e.g. live exchanges (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 20). Hence, while organization may be identified through text (such as reports or

policies) it is *experienced in conversation* (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2008). According to CCO, organizations act and accomplish things through people speaking (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011) and are ‘communicated into being’ (Cooren, 2020, p. 177). These transactional acts entail reciprocity (as exemplified in Schoeneborn et al., 2014) and mutuality: all the actors involved in communication acts, irrespective of their ontological status, interact and thus co-construct the organization. CCO can be seen, therefore, to embrace and exemplify the spirit of dialogic view on organization. In general, it views organizations as pluralist and hypermobile processes constituted by reciprocal acts of communication performed by heterogeneous actors.

However, while dialogism aptly captures the dynamic meaning-making processes that play out between heterogeneous and empowered subjects, we find that it inadvertently presumes that every act of organizing involves the *active engagement of actors*, i.e. an interchange of ideas and a dynamically changing context for unfolding acts of communication. As evocative and attractive as this dialogic image may be, we propose that it fails adequately to explain three of the more prosaic features that are typical of how people often organize, and are organized within, modern organizations, namely: mechanization, homogenization and agency-deprivation. In the next section we introduce a monologic view as a complement to that of the dialogic, one that better accounts for these particular aspects of organizing and organization.

Monologic Organization

In this section, we sketch the outlines of a monologic perspective on organization, exploring its traits by treating it as the ‘flipside’ of the dialogic form. To this end, we turn to Michel Serres’ notion of monological communication which offers a complementary perspective from which to view, analyse and understand organization. His treatment of the monologue–dialogue distinction allows Bakhtinian insights to be extended into the realm of communication.

In Serres’ conceptualization, monologue and dialogue represent two extremes in communication. On one end of the spectrum, in dialogic communication, meaning is precarious and undecided (Serres, 1982b) and there is no strict overlap between sender and receiver of a message and between meanings at the beginning and at the end of a communication process. Receivers’ interpretations of a message may interfere with speakers’ intentions. Such friction – Serres speaks of interference or noise – is an inherent part of the dialogic process. Indeed, for Serres, the potential of communication acts to *fail* spawns the possibility of invention and, paradoxically, creates the conditions of possibility for communication to occur. It is a precondition, because the interference that makes the transmission of meaning fail simultaneously fuels the dialogic process – it stimulates further exchange resulting in the emergence of new meanings and opening the floor to new ideas (Lotman, 1988). In a dialogue, differences in meaning are constitutive of the very process itself, making meanings constantly change. Dialogic communication is thus a highly dynamic process characterized by an active interchange between distinct voices – it remains meaningful as long as equivocation is not maximal (Serres, 1982a).

On the other end of the spectrum, in the case of monologic communication, the signal is perfectly transparent and unequivocal (Serres, 1982a) and the relationship between sender and receiver turns into the ‘absolute harmony of similarities’ (Brown, 2002, p. 6). Monologic attempts at communication contain claims to absolute truths that cannot be undermined, creating an overlap of the speaker’s meaning and the listener’s interpretation (Lotman, 1988). In monologic communication, any difference between the meaning at the outset of the communication process and that at the end is anomalous: by definition, monologic meanings do not evolve. While monologic communication is thus the perfect or optimum transfer of meaning, in Serres’ (1982a, p. 79) view it is in the end

‘not meaningful’. Mechanized or hegemonic optimization produces a copycat harmony that is tantamount to a ‘failed’ relation between the sender and receiver, and to failed communication.

Important for our undertaking is that Serres’ work provides a few brush strokes that help paint an explanatory picture of what monologic communication entails: the reproduction of the status quo, the dominant role of the speaker, passivity of the listener (in a sense that the latter does not contribute anything to the communication process, other than what has been expected of them), and fixed meaning flowing from the former to the latter. Linking these characteristics to the central tenets of dialogic communication that we described in a previous section, we may see monologic organization as its reversal: *singularity* instead of *plurality*, *unilaterality* instead of *reciprocity*, and *solidity* instead of *liquidity*.

In monologic organization it does not matter who speaks or what is being said as long as speech is monologic and mechanistically reaffirms pre-set truths. Since the monologic mechanism remains unaffected by the turnover of actors or the variability of meanings they attempt to communicate, it seeks to impart a sense of *solidity*: its operation is never in danger of being thwarted and individual operators are always inert. ‘Solidity’ therefore conveys durability of the mechanism itself – its imperviousness to contingencies, such as semantic equivocations (and not, e.g., high quality communication or positively ‘solid’ understanding between actors). As recipients of content *unilaterally* communicated to them are bereft of individual agency and relational reciprocity (cf. Peters, 1999), and devoid of possibilities to intervene or engage. While in monologic organizing utterances made by both sides of the communication process may appear bilateral and agency-induced, on the contrary, they are purposefully aligned and intertwined in the iterative process; a mechanism, in which imposed meanings are synchronically recurring (Deleuze, 1994). The content of the pronunciation made by one of the sides may hardly matter. To illustrate, in Deleuze’s reading of psychoanalysis (readily transposable to organizational contexts, e.g. Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000), any statement (or *ad extremis* lack thereof) made by an actor (analysand) may become converted (by the analyst) into the statement compliant with the form ‘What you really mean/desire is x’ (Deleuze, 2004, cited in Lambert, 2006). In another unilateral language game – a ‘primitive language’ (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009) – prompts can be used to provoke standardized, scripted responses. The speaker knows exactly what reaction must be expected from the listener for the game to be played: for instance, utterance of the words ‘Yes, Sir’ by the private when given an order by a general. Should the recipient’s agency be exercised beyond assuming the pre-scripted role in this unilateral exchange, the monologic game could not be played.

Monologic organization does not value or allow for a plurality of connotations to emerge; instead, it imposes *singular*, disambiguated meanings, synchronized with existing relations of power. Monologic organization leads not to dialogic understanding but, rather, to repetitive reproduction and regurgitation of meaning. Thus, the ultimate authority of *monologic* communication is semantically premised on ‘the power to express a truth directly’ (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 238). Even multiple instances of such truth-telling, as long as each attempt remains singular and unilateral, lead not to dialogue between the viewpoints, but rather to creation of separate microcosms of meaning. In organizational terms it equates to a mechanistic system in which any singular meaning (a convenient ‘truth’ perhaps) spoken by an inert organizational actor is pronounced unilaterally and without interaction. Such communication thereby seeks to impose and assure that system’s unchangeability and durability.

We are not making a purely theoretical point. The lineaments of the monologic perspective can, we suggest, help to analyse and understand organizational realities that are relatively homogenized, mechanistic and agency-deprived. In the remainder of this essay, we introduce three empirical vignettes in an attempt to exemplify those micro, meso and macro contexts in which, in our reading, the dialogic perspective’s heuristic potential is limited in comparison with the monologic one.

Empirical Illustration

Example 1 – Micro register: ‘cogs in the machine’ – translators in the EU institutions

The experiences of being a translator – allegedly associated with a high degree of autonomy and creativity (Gouadec, 2007) – in the strictly bureaucratic context of the institutions of the European Union (EU) (Gravier, 2013) and analysed by one of the authors (Izak, 2016), prompt us to consider this line of work from a monologic perspective.

The translation services within each institution (e.g. Parliament, Commission, etc.) are compartmentalized according to nationalities and strictly hierarchically ordered through a granular grading system predominantly based on seniority. Performance plays a secondary role and, when it does impact on automatic progression, it merely accelerates or decelerates it by a relatively narrow margin. Staff turnover is minimal. External market pressures are absorbed by the system, which ensures its relative *solidity*, for instance: rapidly increasing technological pressure pushing down demand for human translators resulted in slightly increased job rotation within the institutions (as some translators sought retraining opportunities), but no lay-offs. As the saying among EU institution staff goes, ‘It is a job for life.’

Translation in the context of EU institutions involves using a tripartite mechanism. The centralized terminology database is the first instance deciding on the correspondence between words and expressions in the respective languages: at this stage the bulk of semantic content is produced by mechanical association of terms. The leftovers – words and expressions not yet captured by the central database – are disambiguated by local terminology databases, specific to separate linguistic units. As the last port of call, and relevant only to a minor fraction of translated content, translation units host ‘expert groups’, which make decisions regarding rules of translation. Only at this very final stage are ‘judgement calls’ exercised. However, this petty discretion is denied to translators (most of whom do not belong to expert groups): their single task is to mechanically match words and expressions – pre-decided in accordance with the above hierarchy – while the central database remains at a core of this process (updates to the latter automatically supersede rulings made by local databases or experts). Therefore, meanings are established *unilaterally* and any deviations from the norm are removed during the post-translation review. Attempts at creativity are not welcomed and transgressions involving semantic embellishments are promptly discarded, thus ensuring the process’s near-perfect homogeneity.

Example 2 – Meso register: spiritual organization

In order to illustrate the efficacy of the monologic perspective on the intermediate organizational level of analysis, we choose to focus on Art of Health (AoH), a large international non-profit organization providing self-development programmes with a strong spiritual bent. Research underpinning this vignette was conducted by one of the authors (Izak, 2007) in 2003 and 2004. All names are fictitious.

AoH is present in more than 150 countries, has more than ten thousand centres worldwide and millions of followers. Maru Swami, a guru, who wields supreme power and is considered an incarnation of Buddha, remains a sole decision-maker regarding issues of any importance including these concerning local branches. Yet, for the local managers there exists no other way to learn about a rationale underpinning a decision or discuss its content than by in-person contact with Maru Swami himself, typically only possible during a visit to his Ashram based in India (Izak, 2007). At the time of research, Maru Swami used no phone or email (his high deputies did, though

only in order to pass his decisions to local centres). The guru does not typically source contextual information enabling him to decide on the issues often specific to a given country or region, *nor does he invite discussion* with those ‘on the ground’; rather, ‘*he just knows*’, as members of AoH confided to one of us, because ‘he is at a different evolutionary stage’ [material from author’s research]. Dissent is therefore not as much undesired as precluded by an organizational structure which ensures *unilaterality* of the communication process. The guru’s teachings promote a worldview in which most people’s perspectives on all issues are limited to the point of deterring them from reasonably predicting consequences of their actions or understanding their causes; that is, causes and consequences can hardly be known unless one is sufficiently advanced spiritually. The assessment of sufficiency is left to the guru’s exclusive discretion. For instance, if a given act (e.g. donating to charity) is not leading to the positive consequences that might be anticipated, it still cannot be inferred that such consequences are not present – they are merely extended in time, perhaps even until one’s next incarnation. Therefore, it is equally vain to demand that justice be served. Such justice may not come to a person, yet one is still considered in the worldview to be treated justly: after all, one’s insufficient spiritual development may render one’s perception of justice flawed, and in any case the latter may always come later.

Notions considered by AoH to be true – such as a form of reciprocity construed as ‘law of attraction’, the fact that ‘spirituality is a good thing’, and so forth – are eternally so. They will never change. Their durability needs no explanation and is impossible to undermine. The senior leaders (or ‘deputies’) possess ‘knowledge’, the *solidity* of which cannot be thwarted by empirical facts that might potentially contradict it: their capacity for uttering true statements is beyond empirical verification. Despite the multiplicity of organizational actors involved, sources of meaning are scant and *unilaterally* reduced to one single source, i.e. pronouncements made directly by Maru Swami or statements made by selected others in the hierarchy, the veracity of which he has explicitly confirmed. AoH’s followers are implicitly considered by the organizational hierarchy to be easily substitutable, since the organizational discourse emphasizes the unanimity of values and commonality of goals. It rarely offers rank-and-file followers any discernible role within the organization. Finally, AoH’s rallies (witnessed by one of the authors) accentuate group processes, reactions and responses providing negligible space for an individual expression.

Example 3 – Macro register: the silencing mechanisms of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic

Our third example illustrates how the monologic perspective can inform not only analysis of organizational and institutional levels of social organization at the micro and meso level, but also *political* social ordering. For illustrative purposes we focus on the polity of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) not least because, having undertaken research there for the past decade, one of the authors is familiar with the regime, its culture and political practices.

One of the poorer nations in the world (Belloni, 2014; World Bank, 2020), Lao PDR has been a single-party authoritarian state since the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) took power in 1975. The regime was initially violently repressive and sought to silence any voices of dissent through a regime of harsh punishment, execution and political re-education. The Party attempted to exert control over virtually every aspect of life and social organization. While, as a result of the changed geopolitical situation, the period 1986 to the present has witnessed a gradual loosening of forced coercion of the populace, the polity is still characterized by policies and practices of direct political control that seek to stifle any form of meaningful dialogue or anything resembling Western-style representative democracy.

The political landscape is further complicated by the internal organization of the ruling body: the LPRP. Upper echelons on the Party (including the president, senior ministers of state and provincial/district governors) are still dominated either by (now geriatric) former revolutionaries from the Phatet Lao or individuals drawn from their kinship groups. Kinship patronage is a deeply rooted cultural pattern in Laos dating back millennia (Scott, 1976). In short, the political order is markedly *singular* and *inert* by any standards. Moreover, there is an intense desire and effort on the part of the elites to resist any form of political change and to ensure the system's *solidity* through the Party's incessant hold on power. In Laos, leadership is equated with Party membership (Case, Connell, & Jones, 2017) and degrees of putative power and influence are dependent on relative seniority within the LPRP. The tendrils of party influence thus extend from the Politburo (now in its tenth incarnation) through ministries, provincial and district governor offices, down to village level (the *nai ban* or 'village head') will invariably be a member of the Party (Case et al., 2017; Case & Sliwa, 2020).

On the one hand, the government of Laos is eager to portray the country as a modernizing nation (although, paradoxically, it has no manufacturing sector of any significance) yet, on the other hand, its interests in sustaining *unilateral* power require the maintenance of systems of control that *quell dialogue* and dissent in *practically every social context*, from high-level Party conferences through the many bureaucratic administrative arms of Party down to village-level decision-making (Case et al., 2017; Sims, 2020).

The silencing of actors' voices by the LPRP in Laos can be illustrated by the example of hegemonic appropriation of terms drawn from an ethnographic study of community leadership in a rural development context with smallholder farmers, the great majority of whom were not Party members (Case et al., 2017). The researchers' attempts to find terms for 'community leaders' and 'community leadership' that farmers would be comfortable using proved extremely challenging. The Lao term *phu nam* – which is arguably the closest to a literal translation of the English word 'leader' – was initially suggested by the Western researchers but quickly dismissed by their interlocutors. The farmers pointed out that this expression was only appropriate for the highest leaders within the LPRP, and the farmers were not at all sure or emotionally sanguine that it could be used to designate an informal leader at a local level. Indeed, as Case et al. (2017) concluded, it proved impossible for researchers to discuss leadership in direct ways with farmers precisely because of the Party's control of the lexicon. Instead, in conversation with farmers it was necessary to use more descriptive language, such as *phu nam pha* ('the person who takes others along'), to communicate concepts of community leadership. This ethnographic illustration is indicative of how a large population can be silenced politically by removing from them the very terms they might otherwise use to express power and authority.

Discussion and Conclusions

While the above examples probe organizational realities on different levels and the comparability between their situations must be limited by the contextually different trajectories leading to their occurrence, all three – we believe – illustrate the relative efficacy of applying monologic lenses to studying and analysing them. The automated organizational context of translation services in the EU institutions, is, we contend, difficult to grasp with dialogic notions, other than through their reversal. The spiritual organization we introduced relies on its master's voice pronouncing established unchangeable truths, precludes dissent, is always ready to disarm its critics by belittling their claims and imposes a strictly unitarist worldview on its members. When presented with the inert political hegemony enforcing silence and repressing dialogue of the sort encountered in Lao PDR,

we suggest, the monologic perspective equally helps make far more sense of the prevailing social order than does an exclusively dialogic interpretation.

All three systems are rationalized via sensemaking mechanisms impervious to alteration – partly because they are relatively impregnated from the explicit external pressure to transform. While they do change in a sense that subsequent actors are appearing on their scenes and subsequent actions are undertaken, neither the actors nor their actions are in any important way substantially ‘new’: their fleeting agency-deprived existences, undertakings and locutions are largely predetermined in terms of content and meaning. Power relations are pre-established, and the relative imbalance of power between those involved in them render the majority akin to ‘cogs in the machine’ while the stability of such arrangements is protected by the strict mechanism of control. These systems’ continuous existence is ensured at the expense of pluralist reciprocal and dynamic features of the communication process. While we do not suggest that such and similar organizational realities may not be approached from a dialogic perspective, we do claim that the dialogic view poses a double risk in these cases. First, it may overemphasize the superficial instances of dialogue, thus downplaying the likelihood of its underpinning by the strictly predetermined and mechanized system, e.g. the ongoing, yet unilaterally controlled ‘exchange’ between translators may easily be confused with a meaningful communication. Conversely, it may devalue the extent of embedded agency restriction experienced by the system’s actors, thus yielding to the cursory allure of what they do or say, e.g. the controlled locutions of Laotian regime figureheads risk being confused with their capacity to take unrestrained initiative, leading to a change in future. Both the dialogic and monologic perspectives have their respective advantages and disadvantages. One way of ‘seeing’ is simultaneously a way of ‘not seeing’.

Adjusting analytical lenses

By means of an example, we believe there is a scope for organization studies scholars more readily to embrace the possibility that instances of such unilateral, and often controlled communication are not always best captured in terms of a conversation or interaction. From the perspective of monologic organization that we are advancing it becomes important to explore how and why the conversation is not necessarily ongoing. Rather than privileging how it unfolds, this analytical lens prompts us to ask what factors restrict actors’ agency to restart it and how organizational frameworks may be predisposed to ignore those attempts. Accordingly, we suggest that research in organization studies might benefit from more explicitly and frequently building on literature on dialogue-restricting frameworks – such as rational-bureaucratic measures, means of normative control, and the exercise of autocratic control – and taking the tenets of monologic organization as points of reference.

To be clear, we do not postulate monologic organization to be an ontologically discernible entity; neither, for that matter, is the dialogic organization. What we argue is that discernment is required to assess the relative appropriateness of the lens being employed and, in most instances, an admixture of interpretation – dialogic and monologic – will be required. Nonetheless, our reading of prominent strands of organization studies literature suggests that dialogic organization has become a *de facto* blueprint – perhaps on occasion a monologic blueprint? – for what organization is, thus inadvertently limiting an understanding of certain organizational contexts. Yet we do not intend to nominate the monologic perspective as a new master signifier to supplant it. Rather, the point is to enable monologism to be considered a comparable epistemological prism for making sense of organizations, on a par with dialogism, without presupposing or unwittingly exercising dominance of either of them. While some organizational worlds, teeming with dialogic life, will continue to present an opportunity for heterogeneous multiplicity of voices to be discerned from

the outset, equally the lineaments of singularity, unilaterality and solidity may very well be present there. Managers, politicians and policymakers routinely make the claim to ‘enter into conversation’ with citizens or staff members and to aim for ‘consultation’, ‘participation’ or ‘empowerment’. Dialogue is the preferred currency in efforts to win consent for plans and policies and, consequently, solid, singular and unilateral acts of communication disappear under a veneer of dialogic intentions or pseudo-dialogic pretensions. Conversely, even for those organizations which appear to embody monologic features, the monologic perspective should not become a default position for an inquisitive researcher. Our normative proposal is that an appropriate attitude for the organizational analyst should entail allowing oneself to accommodate one’s epistemological apparatus to the phenomenon being observed, thus providing an opportunity for a more balanced account.

Methodological implications

Our claim is not an ontological one, e.g. that organizations such as those described above *are* monologic (rather than dialogic), but epistemological: monologic lenses should be enabled – on a par with dialogic ones – as a possible alternative set of cognitive heuristics informing organizational analysis. The implications for such analysis may be summarized as follows: the monologic–dialogic relationship describes a continuum of approaches spanning between two extremes and possessing certain identifying features, including singularity and plurality, unilaterality and reciprocity, solidity and liquidity. To enable the monologic–dialogic continuum to inform one’s approach to exploring organizational realities, means to consider these dimensions as potentially useful in calibrating one’s particular methodological toolset. For instance, does a given situation, object, concept or event seem likely to be emerging from interaction, does it seem plausible that it is qualitatively ‘new’ in a sense of having been different in the recent past than it is now, how likely is it that some actors’ construal (of a given situation, object, etc.) will change its meaning for the others, does it come across as somehow special or unique and is perceived as such by other actors? The point is not to decide either way at the outset and thereby predetermine a range of potential findings. On the contrary, this is what we argue against, preferring to give primacy to *epistemological exploration* in lieu of *ontological labelling* (although the latter may result from the former in the fullness of time.² It is a matter of considering situationally the most relevant counterfactual ‘what ifs’ – stemming from the identifying features of the monologic and dialogic perspectives – a fitting pre-analytic exercise. For example, *what if* the verbal exchange between an employee and their boss witnessed by the researcher is considered unilateral? What if it is considered reciprocal? Does processing this situation through either of these ends of the spectrum enable us better to make sense of it, does it enable us to connect the otherwise scattered dots, does it – tentatively at least – seem helpful in explaining the others’ reactions to the situation in question? What if the words uttered by each protagonist were construed as belonging to a predetermined organizational ‘speak’ rendering them unchangeable and solid and protagonists themselves as mannequins playing their part? What if the opposite would apply? While it is unlikely that clear-cut monologic or dialogic rendition will provide the most fitting analytic frame, we do expect the balance to be found somewhere along the continuum.

Finally, the above discussion is not meant as a mechanism of distancing our own voice as external and thus somehow privileged to perform critique. In fact, much of the authors’ own published work to date could easily be characterized as informed by dialogic sensitivity. It is not despite but, rather, *because* of this fact that we insist on considering the assumptions behind our guiding perspective more closely than is usually done and to reflect on its possible limitations, as well as the opportunities it provides.

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Note

1. Established notions construe monologue as an act of speaking either when alone (*monologos* – solitary speech), or to a willing audience (staged performance) or an unwilling audience (a speaker monopolizing a discussion and preventing others from expressing their own opinion) (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/monologue>). Our conceptualization of monologue is compatible with these specific forms, but it defines the term more broadly as any form of speaking *at* people, not *with* people (<https://literaryterms.net/monologue/>).
2. We are conscious that an argument can be made that the three organizations which we have selected for illustrating our points ‘are’, ontologically speaking, monologic, or more monologic than others, and that our argument is, by implication, therefore ontological. However, our purpose – to broaden the theoretical lens so that we start seeing more clearly monologic dimensions of all forms of organizing – is better served by framing the organizational phenomena in question epistemologically rather than ontologically. In fact, we would like to discourage thinking in black-and-white terms of monological versus dialogical organizations precisely because we want to avoid becoming blind again to monologic or dialogicity.

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