

Building new theoretical foundations to understand organization through temporality

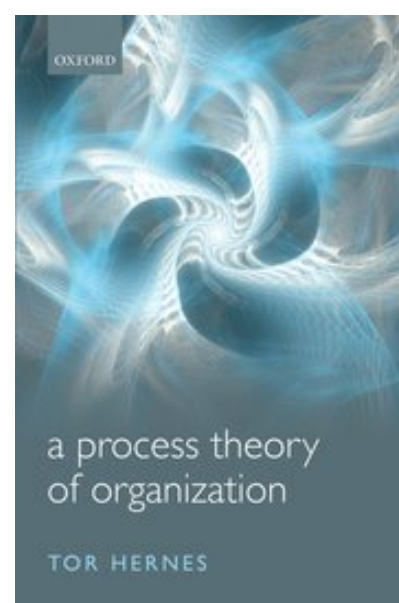
Unplugged - Book review essay

Tor HERNES (2014), *A Process Theory of Organization*. Oxford University Press.

reviewed by

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It is a paradox that there are only a few books that deal explicitly with the notion of organization *per se* in organization studies. *A Process Theory of Organization* is one such book; rather than aligning the theory with those who conceive developments about organization as a spatial phenomenon, this book offers an alternative view by dealing with organization as a temporal phenomenon. This is exactly why *A Process Theory of Organization* constitutes an important step forward in the field of organization theories as a whole. However, as much as this book has influenced my own work, I have to admit that it is not an easy text for scholars. It requires both a strong culture in organization theories and philosophy to fully understand the core ideas developed by the author. That being said, whether or not one agrees with Tor Hernes, this text provides such a fresh perspective on organization that it should help scholars to override traditional assumptions about organization, and to develop new and forward-thinking perspectives. This is particularly welcome in our ever-changing world, marked by the emergence of many new organizational forms steered by new work practices, technologies, and socio-economic challenges. This book is thus urgent enough to be considered as a landmark text for anyone trying to understand organization in the current context; this may be why Tor Hernes won the George R. Terry Book Award in 2015 with this work.

A PROCESS ORGANIZATION SCHOLAR

Tor Hernes is one of the most well-known and established process organization scholars in the field. He has worked for several decades on the topic of organization from a process point of view. During the 2000s, he notably published many articles and books based on process thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Niklas Luhmann, Karl Weick, and Alfred North Whitehead, developing fresh theoretical insights into topics such as space, ethics, and management. With *A Process Theory of Organization*, published in 2014, Tor Hernes has continued what he started to build in *Understanding Organization as Process*, his previous book (Hernes, 2008). The aim of *A*

Process Theory of Organization is to move away from the general presentation of process studies—as he did in this previous book—to a theoretical framework enabling us to study organization as a phenomenon always in a state of becoming. It is possible to identify the link that Tor Hernes makes between these two books through his exploration of concepts such as time and event.

A Process Theory of Organization pushes forward Tor Hernes' theoretical development about organization and temporality by relying specifically on the thinking of Alfred North Whitehead and George Herbert Mead. The presence of this philosophy in the book is not surprising for process organization scholars, as process philosophy (Rescher, 1996) is a cornerstone for this research field (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth & Holt, 2014). Although these thinkers remain rather unknown among organization theorists, the philosophical dimension is made comprehensible and connected to central themes in current debates within organization studies. Furthermore, as Tor Hernes' aim is to shift from a spatial view to a temporal view of organization, this philosophical dimension provides a strong theoretical grounding in order to build alternative perspectives on organization.

EXPLORING ORGANIZATION THROUGH TEMPORALITY

The book is divided into three parts in which the author first criticizes the classic assumptions about organization, second develops his process theory of organization, and third discusses this theoretical framework by exploring some key topics in organization and management.

The first part—"Some problems of organization theory and the potential of process organization theory"—deals with the misleading assumptions that have served to build most organization theories. The author criticizes the tendency to define organization as "social systems distinct from other social systems" (Hernes, 2014: 12). This view assumes that an organization can be analyzed apart from the rest of society, or as merely in interaction with other organizations and the environment. By considering entities and their separation as the ultimate reality, this view misplaces the concreteness of reality. From a process philosophy perspective, the reality is the ongoing movement that brings everything (events, things, etc.) into current experience. From this point of view, things are thus not reality but only the abstractions of reality. Relying on this view, Tor Hernes states that the concreteness of organization is thus not in things but in the process. In other words, the concreteness of organization is not in its materiality but rather in the becoming process of this materiality. More precisely, the process view claims that everything is defined through activities, and there is thus no material thing with inherent properties but only things that are constantly (re)defined, maintained, intertwined, and changed in terms of activities. This view has strong implications for how we define "organization." The term cannot be predefined as a taken-for-granted entity, i.e. a stable structure to be studied, but should be considered as a phenomenon that is constantly in movement.

The second part of the book—"Towards a process theory of organization"—starts with the assumption that organization should be studied in time, which is developed into a perspective called "living present." This is the main shift regarding organization that is suggested in this book. Rather than studying organization as a spatial phenomenon, the

author invites us to develop a temporal view. From this point of view, the living present is where the temporality occurs, as the past and the future are brought together in the present. In other words, the past and future are not isolated from the present but partly constitute it. Tor Hernes thus adopts a “presentist” view of time (Bardon, 2013), in which the present is the container of reality. Studying organization from a living present perspective also means that organization is considered as a temporal phenomenon. In this part of the book, the event is introduced as a key notion to understand this temporal perspective. The event is defined by the author as “a temporal experience marked by closure” (Hernes, 2014: 85). An event can thus be a spatio-temporal entity that can be related to other events. By understanding organization process as the living present, Tor Hernes defines organization process as an ongoing temporal agency of events. The continuity of the organization phenomenon therefore has to be found in this relatedness of events. In this section, Tor Hernes uses illustrative examples from organization studies and his own observations from real life.

The third part—“Process theory and selected aspects of organization and management”—is the shortest section of the book, and is dedicated to the implications of this temporal perspective for our understanding of some core topics in organization studies. Within this section, Tor Hernes discusses the potential of such a temporal perspective in organization studies. He notably deals with the implications of his development in organization change, organizational culture, identity, and institution. The author notably encourages scholars not to see these aspects of organization from a static, linear, or purely spatial approach, but instead to study them in the flow of time. This section can thus be considered as a call to reconsider some classic topics in organization studies through the lens of temporality and event.

WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT FOR ORGANIZATION THEORISTS?

Through this seminal book, Tor Hernes thus provides an original view that has numerous implications for the discipline. The book notably invites readers to override the longitudinal/spatial view of organization and organizational change and instead suggests that we understand organization as a process of which temporality is the tangible aspect. This is an important contribution to organization theories and an important shift away from classic organization theories. This book also has specific implications for process organization studies. Tor Hernes suggests a “post-longitudinal” approach in rupture with studies that define organization processes as a linear series of events. This is not entirely new as other scholars in process studies have already done this, such as Chia (1997), Tsoukas and Chia (2002), and Cooper (2007), who already set the stage for a new shift in organization studies. Despite their significant contribution to this research field, scholars have not really offered an alternative framework to override the longitudinal approach in organization studies. *A Process Theory of Organization* presents this framework to scholars by considering temporality not as a series of isolated events, but as an immanent process in which past and future are experienced only in the present. From this perspective, any empirical description based on a series of events is no longer relevant; new and creative ways of depicting organization phenomena have to come along. Although the theoretical

developments are regularly illustrated with cases and examples, in particular the LEGO and the Ulstein Group cases, these aspects are not touched upon within this book (as Tor Hernes' aim is to provide a theoretical viewpoint): The reader can legitimately ask how to put this into practice. I do not consider the lack of methodological development as the main limitation of this book, as it was not its purpose. However, there is room to develop this further.

One of the main limitations might be the way the concept of organization is used. By suggesting that a company can still be considered as a relevant organization, the author seems to refrain from fully embracing an open way of seeing organization. Tor Hernes convincingly develops an argument against the entitative view of organization, but he still considers companies as organizations in the examples he gives to illustrate his arguments. While it is difficult for any scholar to override the classic assumptions about organization, and to talk about organization without relating the concept to a company (or government body or non-profit organization). This difficulty in defining and talking about organization as a movement also calls into the question the status of a company (or a government body or a non-profit organization).

Another shortcoming could be seen to stem from the "presentist" assumption that features heavily in Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy. By claiming that the present is the container of reality, this view about time considers the past and future as mere (re)construction brought into the present for sense-making purposes. This approach to time can be questioned, as it leads to consideration of the present as more "real" than the past and future. It is maybe not in line with the relational ontology assumption underlying the process view, which would suggest that the past, present, and future are understood as having a concrete existence only in their interrelation in activities. In other words, the past, present, and future should rather be considered as equal and co-defined without defining one or another as the container. Consequently, despite the obvious relevance of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and George Herbert Mead to building the foundations of a process view of organization based on temporality, one might question the status of the present in this philosophy.

In other words, we still have to draw conclusions about such a breakthrough view of organization. It is both a theoretical and empirical challenge for organizational scholars as we are facing new organization phenomena (co-working, freelancing, the maker movement, gig economy, etc.), which might require new theoretical and methodological perspectives to be understood. Rather than being seen as a weakness, these limitations should rather be seen as opportunities for further developments based on empirical studies. By not providing a "ready-to-use" theory, Tor Hernes does not circumscribe his development, instead leaving it open for others to interpret and use, with a multitude of theoretical, methodological, and empirical developments.

To conclude, this book provides foundations to build a new approach in organization studies. It is an inspirational exploration of theoretical development, and a key reference for scholars trying to develop innovative perspectives in organization studies. *A Process Theory of Organization* should be considered as a pioneering first step toward a new intellectual journey for scholars.

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