

# Half a century of French organizational sociology: methodological roots, *compositionist* branches

Christophe Dubois,  
Université de Liège<sup>1</sup>

Now that 50 years have gone by since the publication of *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (French title: *Le phénomène bureaucratique*, 1963) by Michel Crozier, what is the legacy bequeathed by the sociology of organizations, in France and elsewhere, to today's researchers? This contribution considers the premises of this methodology in order to establish two important achievements: the "decomposition" of the notions of organization, State and market; and the distinction of three dimensions of organizations, i.e. their managerial discourse, formal and informal structures. This article ends by considering one contemporary challenge this tradition of research has to face: how to account for the mechanisms of collective action, in order to take part in its composition?

## 1. Introduction

We are surrounded by *organizations*, from the obstetrics unit in a hospital to the funeral home. Whether they are secular, or in the process of developing, real or virtual, multinational or local, bureaucratic or adhocratic, (non-) governmental or (non-) commercial, most of them have been studied by sociologists. In order to properly measure the challenges these researchers face today, it is appropriate to examine the work of two major scholars who left their mark in France, but also on the French-speaking and international scientific landscape: Michel Crozier, who died in May 2013, and Erhard Friedberg. Since the publication of "*Le phénomène bureaucratique*" (Crozier, 1963), this methodology never stopped developing at the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations* (CSO/CNRS) and beyond. The objective of this contribution consists in identifying traces which were decisive in the development of organizational knowledge, and which might enlighten the way toward forthcoming research programmes.

One of the essential contributions of the (French and Anglo-Saxon) sociology of organizations undoubtedly lies in its work toward a progressive *decomposition*<sup>2</sup> of the object into its constitutive processes: the move from "organization" to "organizing". Like Weick (1995), it contributed to relativize the importance of the formal structure of organizations. Neither the organization charts of a firm, an administration or a company, nor their rule books, job descriptions, procedures or technical capabilities, suffice to give an account of their concrete functioning. Researchers have laboured to describe and analyse the "parallel" and hidden structures that emerge behind the "formal" and codified ones. Various studies have allowed people to demonstrate "*concrete systems of action*" (Crozier and Friedberg,

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<sup>1</sup> [C.Dubois@ulg.ac.be](mailto:C.Dubois@ulg.ac.be)

<sup>2</sup> This notion refers, here and after, to Bruno Latour's neologism (2010).

1977) that structure formal organizations, such as the “*cross-regulation*” that goes beyond their boundaries (Crozier and Thoenig, 1975).

Early on, the study of organizational processes went beyond the study of organizations as objects, but the distinction that is made between formal and parallel structures is far from constituting an end in itself. This distinction is progressively replaced by an analysis of the subtle and complex process of organizing, through which the rules of a “collective game” are being structured. Pushing this kind of analysis to its limit, the *sociology of organized action* (Friedberg, 1993) has definitively diluted the concept of formal organization into contingent and provisional “*local orders*”.

“[The organizational approach understood in this way] deals in fact with the establishing and maintaining of local orders that will ensure that behaviour is regulated and that the divergent, if not conflictual, strategies of the concerned actors are integrated. These local orders have their limits. Their resiliency and their scope fluctuate [...]. Nor is their influence total [...]. The characteristics of these local orders, finally, are always specific [...]. The study of concrete systems of action and of the characteristics of the local orders they form makes an essential, though limited, contribution to the study of the regulations governing society” (Friedberg, 1997: 125-126).

The *local-order* arrangements reveal disorder, discontinuity and incoherence in organizations that appear to be well designed, well ordered and well coordinated, but which are actually broken beyond repair.

On the international level, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon research, one may observe similar shift from the organization-as-an-entity toward the organization-as-process; from *organization* to *organizing*. Three authors illustrate various phases of this important turn in the area of “organization studies”: James March, Karl Weick and Nils Brunsson.

One of the numerous contributions made by the works of James March lies firstly in the fact that he showed in 1958 how organizational systems, far from constituting cohesive and coherent entities, can be characterized by their *ambiguity* (Cohen and March, 1974; March, 1978). More so than by the *uncertainty* Michel Crozier emphasized in 1963. Secondly, in a research conducted on American universities, March and his collaborators created the notion of “*organized anarchy*” to analyse organizations as so many relatively chaotic groupings in which solutions determine the problems they can fix (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). In the “*garbage can model*”, the organization appeared as an aleatory process in which the encounter between decision makers, solutions and possible choices allowed problems to be identified and defined. These problems were actually perceived as resources that made it possible to define expertise. Thirdly, by working out a theory of *bounded rationality* (March and Simon, 1958), March and Simon situated their research in the area of decision making, rather than focusing on the results of decisions. Because of this work, they came to consider structures as the products of organizations rather than as their attributes.

The increased attention to processes continues to hold the upper hand over attention paid to organizational entities in the work of many English-language researchers who refuse to consider the supposed entities as evident, “already-there”, or overarching. Among them, Karl

Weick, who was already working on a theory of bounded rationality (Orton and Weick, 1990), took note of the disorderly functioning of some organizations, which he described as “*loosely coupled systems*” (Weick, 1976). He also set himself the task of demonstrating the social construction of organizational entities by their members, who try to make sense of them (“*sensemaking*”); these actors then act on and in accordance with this production of meaning (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is closely linked to organizational processes (“*organizing*”) through which actors “*enact*” not only the organization but also its environment. This *enactment* is highly collective and does not tend to achieve any predefined objectives, but depends rather on available resources for collective action. These resources are subject to reinterpretations at any given time.

Following the neoinstitutionalist works of March and Olsen, Nils Brunsson has taken up the distinction between formal and informal structures, both of which are necessary for maintaining organizational equilibrium. Rules are effective tools for producing collective action in stable organizations, but rules alone are not enough when the context is marked by uncertainty. An informal and shared “*ideology*” allows people to make the decisions that are necessary for collective action (Brunsson, 1982), but above all, in a context of uncertainty, the organization must make sure it can survive economically. In order to do that it must preserve its (constantly threatened) legitimacy in relation to stakeholders whose interests, expectations and values are increasingly diverse. Some ideology taking the form of official discourse is then needed. Reading Brunsson enables to understand why organizations have tirelessly developed new kinds of discourse, like *quality management*, *inter-cultural management*, *corporate social responsibility*, *new public management*, *community management*, *gender management*, etc. All these discourses are based on norms containing multiple contradictions (between individuals, between ideas and actions, between decisions and actions). The classical distinction between a “*formal*” and a “*parallel structure*” was a clear indication that organizations never do exactly what they are supposed to do, but Brunsson’s work on “*organizational hypocrisy*” emphasizes that the same organizations never really do what they say they are doing (Brunsson, 1989).

But let us return to the more closely circumscribed domain of the sociology of organizations, such as this was developed in the French school of CSO. In order to grasp how the notion of organization began to shift in the direction of that of organizing, it will be appropriate to examine the methodology such as it was developed by Michel Crozier and his followers, and then to examine its premises and concepts. Next, two achievements of the discipline will be examined: first by taking into account the “*decomposition*” of the notions of organization, State and market; next by discerning three dimensions that are constitutive of organizations. The last section will address one challenge – among others – that organizational sociology faces today: why should researcher analytically “*decompose*” organizations and collective actions, if not to take part to their composition?

## 2. A hypothetico-inductive method that emphasizes actors, practices and interactions

One of the points of departure for the approach developed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977) consists in rejecting and relativizing

“all determinism of context, environment, ‘objective structures’ of the problems, etc. [...]. In their stead, it raises a question which belongs to another analytic level: what constraints are placed on the capacity of an organization and each of its member to act, develop, and change by the conditions, modalities, and constructs of the games through which they have managed to achieve their cooperation” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980: 259).

This is the origin of many studies conducted by CSO researchers concerning organizations that are *a priori* “classical”<sup>3</sup>, but these studies are also conducted in other areas such as the political and administrative system (Dupuy and Thoenig, 1985) and public action<sup>4</sup> or, more recently, concrete markets<sup>5</sup>.

In all these areas researchers use a methodology that is systematically based on an inductive procedure, and there are two reasons for this. Firstly, because they consider their empirical field as an opportunity to immerse themselves in a quasi-ethnographic manner, which allows concrete modes of acting and functioning to be discovered. Accordingly, they reject all determinism that is abstractly defined. Secondly, because they draw support from empirical results (which may be partial) in order to reveal the questions research will focus on, and to gradually work out the appropriate problematic.

The hypothetico-inductive approach is thus opposed to the hypothetico-deductive approach, according to which all research has its origin in a corpus of questions and hypotheses developed from the existing literature. Collecting data only comes after that, and it is intended to confirm or falsify the hypotheses that were formulated in the beginning. Finally, after the comparison of data collected with hypotheses, analysis follows. This allows existing theories to be completed, falsified or enriched, contrary to what is maintained with reference to “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1968), according to which empirical results have to be interpreted in the light of theory. It is from this second point of view that the sociology of *organized action* (Friedberg, 1997) suggests beginning research with fairly large questions: what changes do new technologies bring to offender management? How are transactions handled in a market where farm animals are sold? How can a policy of school mediation be implemented locally? And so on. These questions allow someone to begin an empirical inquiry whose shape will be defined step by step, just like a problematic of research. So it is appropriate not to formulate hypotheses in advance, concerning what one may find in the field, and to leave open the choice of interpretative framework: the sociology of risk or of quality, of translation or of innovation, of regulation or of instrumentalization of public action, the mapping of a network or of controversies, etc. The experience in the field will

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<sup>3</sup> Such as the tobacco monopoly (Crozier, 1963), hospitals (Kuty, 1975), or universities (Musselin, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> For example, education policy (Ravinet, 2008) and policies against drug addiction (Bergeron and Nathanson, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Such as early music (François, 2007) and meat markets (Anzalone, 2005).

reveal problematics that need to be addressed by the researcher (himself/herself equipped of some “methodological” concepts – see *infra*), and the theoretical frameworks necessary to make progress.

Such an approach aims at dealing with empirical elements by paying attention to them.

“Description here is at least as important as ‘theory’, that is, the interpretation of observed ‘facts’ [...]. This discovery, that is, the elaboration of the ‘facts’ about the patterns of relations that constitute the particular structure of the field being investigated, does not obey a simple empiricism. Rather, it is structured by [...] a set of theoretical premises expressed in notions such as strategy, power, uncertainty, and game, which provide an analytic method or interpretive framework for observing the dynamics in the structuration of exchange and bargaining relations among a set of interdependent individuals” (Friedberg, 1997: 218).

Let us reconsider here the hypothetico-inductive method. It is called “hypothetical” because it rests on a general problematic shaped by some premises (three of these will be distinguished *infra*: collective action is always *uncertain*, actors are *autonomous* and *rational*) and on some “methodological concepts” (*strategy, power, uncertainty, game, concrete systems of action, local orders*, etc.); and it is called “inductive” because it aims at accounting, through some singular problematic, for the interactive process structuring the investigated field.

Among the empirical facts that can be collected, the three kinds of empirical data that are the most “solid” have to do with actors, their practices, and their interactions. The first thing to do is to list the actors, to give details about their demographic characteristics, their nature (men, women, employees, white-collar workers, operators, and organizations or other kinds of collective groups). The next thing to do is to give details about their practices, that is, their gestures, operations, tasks, roles, missions, tools, skills, rhythms, etc., basically to depict their interactions using their natures as evidence (personal or impersonal, formal or informal, affective or calculating, cooperative or conflictual), their frequency, their form (dense or loose network, centralized or distributed), their stability, etc.<sup>6</sup> All these “facts” can be gathered empirically, either by direct observation (this may include observation by a participant), or by semi-structured interviews (Friedberg, 1988). Observation may in some cases require the observer to identify and name by himself, *ex post facto*, what he has observed, while the interview arrangements generally delegate this naming-task to the interviewee. For these reasons one may consider that the semi-structured interview is the shortest path that allows the researcher to get access to practices and interactions. Following all this, the general procedure is to collect data using two other techniques that will not be discussed here: observation and document analysis (political and official texts, rules, websites, etc.). Observation (whether by a participant, in the field, visible observer, etc.) allows researchers more direct access to practices and situations; document analysis provides support for discourses and rules that structure situations of collective action (and which are in turn structured by them).

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<sup>6</sup> This list refers to the three types of questioning that direct the morphological procedure for the analysis of concrete markets (François, 2008: 15-16).

At the heart of this method is description (of actors, their practices and interactions), which is at least as important as the interpretation of observed “facts”. However, describing an organization is not something that can be done automatically<sup>7</sup>: one describes the actors who belong to the organization, along with their experiences, their practices, instances of (co)operation, of tension, hopes and fears, all of which requires not only that the investigator throw himself as completely as possible into the field work (Friedberg, 1997: 218), but also requires that data collected be systematically compared or confronted with information received in other ways. Through this rigorously carried out procedure the structural features of the object studied (certain skills, certain problems, recurrent tensions) will become identifiable. An initial phase of analysis will thus attempt to understand the rationality of behaviours considered to be structural elements. A second phase will allow a problematic to emerge, when salient observations are integrated.

Let's return to the stage of data collection, more exactly to the semi-structured interview. As Friedberg (1988) says, the first part of the interview consists in asking an interviewee to describe his practices at work. This requires going beyond a formal description in order to obtain a concrete description, as precise as possible, of the worker's tasks, gestures, missions and role in dealing with the main aspects of these things, the more and less difficult, the more and less interesting, the more and less frequent, as well as concrete daily problems and the practical manner of responding to them. In the second part, it is appropriate to reduce the emphasis on the various operations carried out by the interviewee in order to focus more closely on his relations with other workers at work, and thus to obtain a description of phenomena of cooperation. Here the idea is to map the interviewee's relationships at work, including the significance of each relationship, their frequency, their mutual interest, effectiveness, any conflictual aspects, etc. As more interviews are conducted, it becomes possible to draw up a “sociogramme” (Friedberg, 2002) that becomes more and more complete as regards the work unit being analysed. Such a sociogramme constitutes the essential tool that allows researchers to analyse the “famous” games (of power, cooperation, blocking, decision, etc.) around which the interactions of the unit are stabilizing.

As one can see, the identification and description of actors, their practices and interactions are the basis of the sociological analysis of collective action. The value of the analysis from this point of view is essentially twofold. On one hand it allows the production of concrete knowledge concerning the properties and structures of power and the modes of regulation of the system of concerned actors. On another hand, it allows the organization of a structured process of communication of results that makes it possible to communicate the elements of the analysis to interested parties, and to ensure that continual attention is given to their view

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<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour writes something similar when he underlines, in a manner that might be thought provocative, that “the simple act of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that requires as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborated biochemical reaction. No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to the description. However, we worry that by sticking to description there may be something missing, since we have not ‘added to it’ something else that is often called an ‘explanation’. And yet, the opposition between description and explanation is another of these false dichotomies that should be put to rest (...). If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description” (Latour, 2005: 136-137).

of things, in terms of the game or games in which the actors are involved, to the extent that the analysis has revealed this.

### **3. A methodology based on three premises and four “methodological” concepts**

The three premises of the sociology of organized action centre upon situations of collective action, that are always seen as problematic; and upon actors who are postulated as autonomous, rational and taking part in relations of power.

Firstly, it is assumed that collective action always constitutes a concrete problem rather than a solution. Whenever people have to interact, it raises the question of the modalities of their interaction according to their own interests, which are not spontaneously converging. Concrete situations of interaction are deeply singular and might be characterized by a wide range of forms: coordination, collaboration, cooperation, negotiation, conflict, subordination, etc.

Secondly, spaces of (inter)action are structured by actors whose behaviours are, in turn, partly determined by the structured space of interaction, but here, the agency itself takes precedence over the structure, without always denying it. This means that actors are always seen as autonomous although they are subject to multiple social constraints. Thus, actors do enjoy a certain margin of freedom, though this very space is a source of uncertainty for their partners, as it is for the organizations they belong to. This autonomy is based on their ability to draw upon resources in regulations and official statements, formal structures, technical devices, etc.

Thirdly, it is assumed that actors’ behaviours are rational. They have good reasons for doing things the way they do them. These good reasons are not reducible to the maximization of their utility, and are contextual: they are not valid at all times, but apply to given situations as a function of the perception of the actor who is involved in these situations. This rationality of actors is thus limited (Simon, 1955) and multi-modal. “It can be instrumental (motivated by the interests of actors), axiological (motivated by values), cognitive (based on knowledge and perceptions) or institutional (related to constraints that are imposed by the institution)” (Musselin, 2005: 64-65).

In addition to these three premises, the hypothetico-inductive method previously discussed is based on a few “methodological” concepts.

Firstly, the “*concrete system of action*” constitutes an empirical object, more so than a philosophical construct (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977: 242). It can be defined “as a structured human ensemble which employs relatively stable game mechanisms to coordinate the actions of its participants. It furthermore maintains its structure, i.e., the stability of its games and the relationships among them, by means of mechanisms of regulation. These, in turn, form the content of still other games” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980: 153). The analysis of such a

system consists therefore in trying to reconstruct, building on the games previously discovered and described, the basis of the more general mode of regulation through which these games are organized and linked to each other. In other words, to depict the regulation enabling the existence of the system to which these games belong and which legitimizes their rules (Crozier and Thoenig, 1975: 27).

Secondly, “*power*” must be understood as a necessary ingredient of collective action, which cannot be taken for granted. People need each other when they are confronting problems that must be resolved, particularly problems that involve a “*zone of uncertainty*”. However this may be, each person is free to refuse to give (free) help to his or her fellow workers, which may put them into a position of dependency in relation to these persons, who derive power from the situation. Power is here thought of as an element of relationships, not as a personal quality, and it explains why people who have been given some hierarchical authority (which is then a personal quality) are so often powerless to solve concrete organizational problems (as opposed to the workers of the *Monopole* studied by Crozier in 1963). Here there is no question of denying the importance of neither the hierarchical authority, nor the State, but their roles are relativized and their apparent unity is deconstructed. Thus, one looks more carefully at the games of actors, rather than imputing legitimacy and power *a priori* to the structure of authority. Although they possess a degree of autonomy, these actors are in a mutual relation of strategic interdependence with each other, and consequently must ensure cooperation through the construction of a local order whose rules and structures stabilize their interactions and negotiations, at least partially or temporarily.

The study of concrete interactions allows us to discover behavioural regularities that are relatively stable, and that might be called “strategies”. “A strategy, therefore, is nothing other than the inferred basis, *ex post facto*, for the empirically observed regularities of behaviour. It follows that such a strategy is in no way synonymous with willed behaviour, anymore than it is necessarily conscious” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980: 25). Far from any temptation toward “psychologism”, these strategies depend less on actors’ personal objectives than on characteristics of observed situations. Within contexts of action, they try to preserve their autonomy, perhaps by redefining their objectives – at any rate in a manner that is rarely clear and coherent.

The “formal rules”, finally, constitute a privileged object for the analyst. Without denying their importance, one may still observe that they never constitute anything but a very approximate description of the real functioning of organizations where “the actual work deviates from the prescribed one, reporting lines are shortcut and bypassed, decision processes follow only very partially theoretical models and problem-solving patterns are unexpected and surprising”. In addition to that, formal rules “create their own problems, that is to say their own uncertainties that arise from the difficulties raised by the daily implementation and application of their requirements” (Friedberg, 1992: 534-535). Michel Crozier’s demonstration of a “vicious bureaucratic circle” (1963) is a perfect illustration of this observation: the more the organization (in the person of its managers) tries to solve concrete problems (in the case of the *Monopole*, breakdowns), the more they try to reduce



unforeseeable *zones of uncertainty*, by multiplying centralized and formal rules; and when this happens, the more the organization's net of rules turns out to have holes in it, various kinds of loopholes, through which actors who want to gain power pass, thus increasing the zones of uncertainty again.

Of course, the strategic analysis of organizations is not completely contained in three premises and four "methodological" concepts, but these elements allow us to grasp two achievements of the works inspired by this method over the last 50 years.

## 4. Two achievements of the organizational sociology

Distinguishing the French-speaking organizational sociology from the strategic analysis developed at CSO is not easy (Bernoux, 1990; Scieur, 2011). One of the reasons for the success of this methodology is surely the fact that it considers organizations as structured by interactions and games of power linking actors together. By describing and reconstituting systems of concrete action, it produces concrete and local knowledge. It is appropriate to emphasize two essentially established points from the work begun by Crozier (1963) and continued by Friedberg: one involves the gradual decomposition of the notions of organization, State and market (Friedberg, 1997); the other, an analytical distinction between three organizational dimensions (Friedberg, 2012).

### 4.1 Concrete systems of action *and* Local orders: decomposition of the ideas of organization, State and market

Firstly, if the research conducted at the CSO has allowed for the gradual *decomposition* of the notion of organization, the same has happened with the notion of the State. By deconstructing the idea according to which the State is a highly integrated, centralized and homogeneous entity, this research has emphasized the State's character as plural, extensively connected in a system of relations that extend to the local level, and apt to operate in accordance with modes of regulation that are crossed with those of representatives of other organized interests (Grémion, 1976; Worms, 1966). Applied to the analysis of public policy, this work allowed French political scientists to get past the picture centred around public agencies, formal decision-making processes and the top-down impact of public intervention. What they revealed, in sharp contrast, was the eminently conflictual and discontinuous nature of the complex process of public regulation, which implies multiple actors, games, kinds of knowledge, norms, etc. During the 1990s, a shift happened from the notion of *public policy* towards that of *public action* (Musselin, 2005). This notion reflects the plural nature of processes of regulation in which many public actors participate, in addition to a like number of private actors or those connected to associations.

The micro- and meso-sociological approach of Crozier thus established the impossibility of understanding the action of the State without taking into consideration specific relationships

between actors who are involved (Crozier, 1972; Zittoun and Demongeot, 2010; Le Galès, 2011). This approach has now digested the critiques pointing out its denying of the specificity of the political field, arguing that the State can't simply be diluted in some *concrete systems of action*, that are designed without prioritizing among them (Leca and Jobert, 1980). However, *Actors and systems* continues to influence French political scientists who are keen observers of the function and dysfunction of administrations, and concrete problems that collective action creates for bureaucrats. They are nowadays underlying the fact that, instead of producing public policy, the State increasingly interacts in a process of collective action through which public action emerges (Smith, 1999).

The sociology of organized action still characterizes major policy studies conducted by CSO members (Borraz, 2011; Bergeron and Nathanson, 2012). It invites researchers to track, trace and account for public action through the daily work and interactions of actors who are implementing it. In doing so, it questions the articulation between the daily practices of public servants on the one hand, and documents, discourse, and instruments (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007) on the other hand.

Secondly, the question of the relationship between organizations and markets has often been studied as an essentially conceptual case of opposition, or at least contrast, between forms that economic activity may take, and the resources that provide its relative stability. During the 1990s the sociological approach to economic activity was made up of two versions of reality, which both common sense and social science were long used to opposing markets and organizations. First these inquiries were separate; the work devoted to these two objects went through parallel movements that made them appear quite similar, if not actually the same. On one hand sociologists tried to show that markets are not a mode of organization of exchanges that occurs naturally, in the absence of any other social institution that might take charge of exchanges. To the contrary, the market, in order to exist, is always involved with forms of organization (eventually informal ones) that are stable and structured. On another hand, by getting involved with the continuous networks of local orders, the organization comes to look more like a market, appearing as a system of exchanges as well.

« [No one can] oppose a concrete system of action to a market, because the latter always includes the former. Every concrete system of action constitutes a market to the extent that it defines and structures a space of competition and of negotiated exchange around the purchase and sale of rare possibilities of action, which the participants need and which, to maintain itself, will itself require regulation, arrived at through the bargaining. In this perspective, elements of the market and of competition will exist as much in the “market place” as in the organizations, and elements of coordination by rules will exist in the “market” as well as in organizations. The relations that are formed in a market as well as in organizations are not abstract but concrete, that is, they are “embedded” (Granovetter, 1985)” (Friedberg, 1997: 123).

Following two seminal studies conducted by the CSO (Dupuy and Thoenig, 1986; Crozier, 1987), and drawing on the “new economic sociology” (Swedberg, 1997), some recent research showed how concrete markets are organizing the transformation of goods and services into merchandise (Anzalone, 2005); how the supermarket is organized by brokers and professional -designer, packager, and merchandiser- playing between products and

consumers (Barey, Cochoy, and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000); and how market and public action devices intertwine in supporting the development of early music in France (François, 2007).

In the last 50 years, our understanding of the notions of organization, State, and markets have changed. The boundaries of these notions have gradually been deconstructed by analyses that have highlighted the collective action that grounds the notions themselves. Looking for the dynamics of collective action, sociologists have led to redefining the conceptual framework and the cognitive maps that were, until then, belonging to the sociology of work, to political sciences or to economics.

The result of this analytical *decomposition* of notions, boundaries, and the different relationships associated with it is that sociology does not need specific tools in order to come to grips with the realities of organizations, policies or markets. Whether it is a matter of investigative protocols to be invoked for description's sake (semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, observation, documentary analysis, network analysis, etc.) or of a system of concepts that are necessary to analyse those realities (concrete system of action, power, strategy, rules, etc.), the sociologist of organizations, of markets, or of public action can use the same set of tools. These tools emphasize granular and rigorous description of actors, their practices and interactions. In doing so, they renew certain notions that economics, political science and the sociology of work had left too abstract.

#### 4.2 Organizations in three dimensions

As it is well known, the sociology of organizations traditionally distinguishes between formal and informal regulation. This distinction gives rise to the study of negotiation games concerning official rules in the “classical model of the organization” (Friedberg, 1997: 17). As such, it allows us to clarify the dynamic relationships that exist between “formal” and “parallel” structures, as indicated by the French title of Friedberg's book, *Le pouvoir et la règle* (1993). In organizations the distribution of hierarchical authority only rarely corresponds to the distribution of power. Power games can be understood as kinds of rational adaptation to imperfections in the formal structure. By the very fact of engaging in power games, actors contribute to the continuance of the formal system, even as they work to undermine it. The rule thus constitutes a constraint as well as a resource: it structures interactions only because its application remains uncertain. « The actual role of the formal structure in an organization doesn't consist in determining directly the behaviour of its members, but in structuring some spaces enabling them to negotiate between themselves and the game » (Friedberg, 1992: 536).

Taking fully into account the achievements previously retraced in a schematic manner, it will be of heuristic value to consider organizations as being made up of not two but three dimensions, which Friedberg distinguishes (2012).

The first one corresponds to the managerial discourses –close to the ideologies studied by Brunsson (1989)-, which define the values, the mission and the philosophy of the organization. They characterize the practices of communication, mobilization, representation and legitimation that are undertaken by upper-level employees. All this is reflected in the little mottoes they use, such as “we like to give our employees responsibility”, “we are betting on cultural diversity”, “we do better things, we do things better”, “the customer is at the centre of everything we do” and “we support sustainable development” – things written in large type on websites, and printed in company newsletters.

The second dimension concerns what one could call the “materiality” of the organization. This refers to the codified and official part of the structure of roles, goals and procedures of coordination, as well as to the effort toward technical coherence in searching for solutions to problems, and to a certain quest for legitimacy. This dimension is represented by business charts and graphs, rule books and procedures, and also by buildings and installed technologies, such as wi-fi networks, intranet systems and SAP programmes that partly determine, restrict and control interactions.

As for the third dimension of organizations, it is the result of mutual interactions between actors, and between the other dimensions. It is rooted in the multiplication of practices, interactions and routines that are not officially planned, or are clandestine, hidden, aiming at the construction and maintenance of a space for negotiation. This third dimension becomes tangible for actors when they discover little by little the information that was never officially communicated to them, that is, the rules of the game, strings to pull and other little tricks, the organizational culture and its secrets, which protect the members of an organization from the myth of transparency.

These three dimensions do not coincide with the hierarchical or functional lines of force in the organization; they percolate through the levels of organizational charts, and the gaps and non-standard occurrences that characterize them are numerous and diverse. “Organizational hypocrisy” (Brunsson, 1989) is a title for one of these, and it is generated by the fact that all actors share neither the same logic nor the same rhythm. Firstly, the neo-management subscribes, like consultancy (Djelic, 1998), to logics of control over their operators. It believes in putting them in competition with each other in order to make them interchangeable and thus superfluous. However workers subscribe to a logic of maintaining their autonomy, and a monopoly over the things they do, in order to keep their jobs. Secondly, actors do not share the same rhythm: managerial discourse change, sometimes quite quickly, according to certain fashions, but practices are well-known as something hard to change, and workers and labour organizations are known for their resistance to change. The increasing gap between the bottom and the top, often increased by the multiplication of intermediary layers (often created to support and “put over” the new managerial discourse, supposed to restore the legitimacy of the organization), constitutes a second way in which the organization gets off track. Local-managers in the public sector often face these gaps in front line (Schepers, 2006; Fielding and Innes, 2006).

Finally as Friedberg (2012) underlines the fact that managerial discourses and formal structures may overlay informal structures, but the latter also determine formal structures and managerial discourses. This statement refers to the hypothetico-inductive principle, paying attention above all to local orders which by stabilizing themselves also structure rules and discourses (Cooren *et al.*, 2006).

## 5. Description and de-composition, before interventions and “composition”?

Why are organizational sociologists depicting situations of collective action in detail? And why are they analytically *decomposing* organizational, political, or commercial facts? For Friedberg, the researcher produces some local and concrete knowledge and provides some “help with using that knowledge which comes from the actors themselves in the field under investigation” (1993: 302). The sociologist of organizations is thus a sociologist of interventions.

“He is not so much a producer of knowledge as a mediator whose essential contribution lies in exchanges, in unusual connections, and through these, certain realizations which he or she is able to bring to light in the field of intervention in which he or she is working” (Friedberg, 2001: 111).

This work of intervention depends above all on the sociologist’s ability to “make the field speak”. For this reason it requires a descriptive attitude more than a normative one.

As mentioned above, this primacy given to description brings Friedberg closer to Latour, but in the work of both, it contributes to the fulfilment of a higher practical objective: intervention and organizational change for one; the “composition” of a common world for the other. Their works can thus be compared through a similar operation of decomposition. This is also how one may speak of the work of French sociology of organizations in relation to the notions of organization, State and market. Friedberg uses the term “dissolution” in this connection; Latour deliberately speaks of “de-composition”:

“Even though the word “composition” is a bit too long and windy, what is nice is that it underlines that things have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure; it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theatre, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography; it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising,” retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavour. Speaking of flavour, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of “compost,” itself due to the active “de-composition” of many invisible agents... Above all, a composition can fail and thus retains what is most important in the notion of constructivism (a label which I could have used as well, had it not been already taken by art history). It thus draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is well or badly constructed, well or badly composed. What is to be composed may, at any point, be decomposed” (Latour, 2010: 474).

Here, in our opinion, lies one of the most important challenges facing the sociology of organizations. Even when an organization has been analytically “decomposed” and organized

action has been described, everything remains to be done. Following Latour, “it is therefore perfectly justified to say that sociology cannot be satisfied with ‘simply describing’ associations, and that it cannot content itself with displaying a multiplicity of new connections” (2005: 374). For Latour, the sociologist bears a “political project”: to “compose” a world in common. The “epistemological separation” disappears (was it ever there?). The meaning of situations of collective action remains to be discovered, decomposed and re-composed, within large industrial groups, in start-ups, in schools and universities, prisons and NGOs... and call for reflexive approaches to research (Cunliffe, 2003).

For half a century the French sociology of organizations developed impressively. Based on a hypothetico-deductive methodology rooted in the field and centred around interactions (actors and their practices), it enlightens the three dimensions of the organizations. Each one of these is referring to a general sociological theory structured around discourse, regulation, and practices. However, some challenges exist as well. One of these calls for an organizational sociology targeting researchers as much as workers and questioning the role of sociologists from University in a changing world – to be *composed*. Participatory action-research is an option (Greenwood, Foote Whyte and Harkavy, 1993; Cassell and Johnson, 2006). Another one remains: in the last decades, Crozier and Friedberg pursued a single objective, one which was defined by, for, and with actors on the ground. The training of researchers, workers and managers remains their privileged form of influence:

“ We are determined to go beyond the production of technocrats convinced to have the good solutions and oblivious of, or insensitive to, the consequences of their policy-initiatives. All our effort has been to design an institutional framework in which we then can deliver programs that address this issue and promote a rigorous, contextualized, and self-reflective vision of the policy process, with a special and fundamental emphasis on understanding the problems of implementation grounded in the explicit, adaptive, and empathetic consideration of the actions of all stakeholders” (Erhard Friedberg, email of the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2013).

The job must go on.

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