

Review of: "What Is in Organisation? Contents of a Self-Contained Container"

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This is a paper that contrasts two different views on organisations, namely one descending from the container metaphor and one that sees organisations as processes. The author proposes a “third view” that is supposed to conjugate the two aspects in a unitary framework.

The first thing that puzzles me a bit is the insistence on the metaphor. I mean, a metaphor is an artifice meant to suggest some intuition, it is not a definition, and it has not to be taken as such. So, the metaphor is probably suggesting a representation of organisations as objects (rather than processes) that can “host” other objects within them. For this reason, I don’t understand why the author does not question the fact that communication (as a process) cannot be hosted within an object. I believe he does not question this because he is well aware that this is a metaphor; otherwise, we should consider organisations as places, or abstract regions, rather than objects. Or, maybe, the term “organisation” is used to point to different things: an object, a process, a place, an agent, etc.

I wouldn’t say that one rather than the other of these definitions is the right one; probably each one of them refers to a different entity in the realm of organising, or “organised living.”

From a stylistic point of view, I find the paper too full of quotations; the author does not elaborate on what the classics say but continuously directly quotes them, and this makes the reading very cumbersome, at least to my taste. I found the argumentation thus very confused, pretending to be evocative, but ending up being obscure. Some examples: “As soon as, for example, the circumstance that a third person is ignored by two interlocutors is understood as their decision, we are not observing interaction anymore.”, or “For why would we expect to find anything else but decision communication in a system made of decision communication? We would also not expect to find a piece of our body in our mind.” What do these two sentences mean?

Also, the author seems to think that figures can “demonstrate” things, but, even if they could (which I’m not sure about), a semantics should be attributed to what is depicted; the figure cannot speak by itself.

p. 2 I don’t believe that saying that “organisations exist in communication” is equivalent to saying that they are contained in it; I believe that a possible interpretation is that they are constituted by communication.

p. 4 the first time the author tries to interpret Luhmann he says that “Luhmann insisted that the study of this compassing system must not be confused with the study of social systems, of which the compassing system is just one. This sophistry

is indicative of the fact that Luhmann did not conceive of society as a container of communication.” I don’t see how this could be an explanation, a naïve reply to such naïve claim could simply be that society is a sophisticated container of communication.

p. 5 I don’t understand the incipit of section 3 “We have now established that organisations are systems of communication that contain communication.” When do we have established this? Wasn’t this the whole point being discussed? I haven’t seen an argument supporting this claim. Also, the example of water containing fire is misplaced: there is another meaning of containment implied, these are two different concepts expressed by the same term.

p. 6 I don’t understand why from “this system contains decision communication and only decision communication” the author infers “there is neither interaction in organisation nor organisation in interaction”. The paper is full of this kind of inferences from disconnected arguments which makes it really hard to follow.

p. 7 is even more obscure: “For the purpose of this article, Figure 2 shows how we can both insist that there is no interaction in organisation (or vice versa) and nonetheless observe interaction in organisation (or vice versa). Let the donut be organisation and transformed into the cup. Let interaction be coffee. It is apparent now how organisation can contain interaction without changing its own content.” The author should have mercy for the reader. What does this mean? The donut could be turned in a cup of coffee from a topology point of view, but, as he says, “topologists live in reality” and what does this tell us about reality?

I have not understood whether the concept of “contenance” is important in the scope of the present paper or not. It is mentioned 5 times, always with a mysterious aura, which seems to pose on it (and on its difference with the notion of container) a lot of expectations, but then there is no definition at all, no explanation and no comparison with other cognate notions.

P. 8 Fig. 3: The author introduces Figure 3 to illustrate how, counter-intuitively, containers can hold not only liquids, but also glass or porcelain (why so? Why do you need to refer to this if we are still in the metaphor?). I really cannot grasp any intuition on the explanation of Figure 3 and the “sections” it contains. How could a drawing of 3 Cartesian axes with three spirals “fully demonstrate” how tubes or tunnels may form in the case of organisations? I don’t even understand why they should form or what they are for, as this discourse hasn’t been introduced beforehand.

P. 9: Again, I don’t see how a table may demonstrate anything, but I also believe there has been some formatting problem because the semantics of the table as it is displayed are unintelligible: what should be in the third column? (A and B) or (if A then B)?

I don’t understand what the “programmes” the author is talking about are, never introduced before.

P. 10: Sect. 4 starts by claiming that the previous section “demonstrated” that organisations neither have interactions as their parts nor within them, but keep them within limits. I really cannot see where this has been demonstrated; actually, I would not be able to tell where it has been mentioned, maybe in the figures.

P. 10: Yet another sentence that is uttered without explanation and thus results as incomprehensible: “There is hence no need to problematise the container metaphor of organisation as long as we agree that “decisional communication can bring forth organizations as social phenomena (i.e., organizations)” (Schoeneborn et al., 2019, p. 488).”

I think I am entirely missing the point of the paper. I believe it should be re-structured, and more emphasis should be put on the motivations of this whole analysis, on the advantages of the solution proposed by the author, and on its novelty with respect to the state of the art (producing a merge of two theories does not make a third theory, unless this is not motivated and explicitly compared with other theories). For all these reasons, I believe the paper is not ready for publication in its current state, and I thus recommend resubmission.

Finally, the author should check whether Fig. 1 and 2 are free from copyright before including them in their paper.