Peripheral Vision
On Organizations as they Happen
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Abstract
The essay examines what organizations are as they happen. It first argues that the happening of an organization has two basic components: the performance of its constituent actions and practices and the occurrence of events whereby its material arrangements causally support these activities. Equating the idea of something as it happens with that of something in real time, the essay then examines two kinds of real time in which organizations occur. The first is the unfoldings of the performances and events that are the happening of the organization. The second is the co-occurrences of the teleological past, present, and future in organizational actions. As it happens, however, an organization is more than what there is to it in real time. It also embraces the persisting structures of its practices and its enduring material arrangements, both of which, among other things, institute possible real times for the organization. The essay argues that the perpetuation of practice structure should be understood as organizational memory.

Keywords: organizations as events, organizations in real time, objective real time, activity real time, social memory, organization memory, persistence of organization structure

The subtitle of the Second Organization Studies Summer Workshop was ‘understanding organization as it happens’ (see www.egosnet.org/os). Aristotle taught that how something can be understood depends on its character and basic characteristics. In this essay, consequently, I examine what this is, organization as it happens.

In considering what this is — organization as it happens — a pervasive current phrase is helpful. Today, speakers of English often talk of experiencing something, say, a football match or a political debate in real time. To experience a match or debate in real time is to experience it as it happens, that is, as it unfolds, and not later, say, on tape delay. These two ideas, of something as it happens and of something in real time, are roughly equivalent. This equivalency underwrites the strategy I adopt in this article. To explore what is understood in understanding an organization as it happens, I briefly consider what it is for an organization to happen, before turning to a more extended discussion of the real times in which organizations occur.

First, we need a conception of organizations with which to work. I will be dogmatic here and call on the account of organizations presented in my recent essay in Organization Studies (Schatzki 2005). According to this account, an organization, like any social phenomenon, is a bundle of practices and material arrangements. By ‘practices’, I mean structured spatial–temporal manifolds of
action such as political practices, cooking practices, recreational practices and religious practices. An academic department, for example, embraces varied practices, including teaching practices, advising practices, research practices, decision-making practices, and ceremonial practices. Practices, as structured action manifolds, have two basic components: actions and structure. The structure, or organization as I prefer to say, of a practice embraces four principal phenomena: (1) understandings of (complexes of know-hows regarding) the actions constituting the practice, for example knowing how to email and to recognize emailing and knowing how to deliver and recognize lectures; (2) rules, by which I mean explicit directives, admonishments, or instructions that participants in the practice observe or disregard; (3) something I call a teleological-affective structuring, which encompasses a range of ends, projects, actions, maybe emotions, and end-project-action combinations (teleological orderings) that are acceptable for or enjoined of participants to pursue and realize; and (4) general understandings, for example general understandings about the nature of work, about proper teacher–student interactions, or about the commonality of fate. A practice is a space–time manifold of actions organized by an evolving set of such items.

By ‘arrangements’, meanwhile, I mean assemblages of material objects — persons, artifacts, organisms, and things. Examples are a classroom, a manufacturing plant, a call center, a boardroom, and a forest. The aforementioned claim that an organization is a bundle of practices and arrangements thus implies that an organization consists in interrelated practices transpiring amid interconnected material orders. An academic department, for instance, consists in interrelated practices of grading, teaching, advising, research, decision making, and ceremony transpiring amid interconnected offices, classrooms, auditoriums, laboratories, and so on. To simplify my discussion, I will henceforth set aside the facts that, in an organization, practices are interrelated and arrangements connected.

What is it, then, for an organization to happen? The concept of happening is closely connected to that of an event. What, then, is event-like about an organization? Its constituent actions, clearly. Actions are performed, and performances happen. The happening of an organization, therefore, is the performance of its constituent actions. More broadly, the happening of an organization is the carrying out of its constituent practices; the academic department happens, for example, in so far as the practices of grading, teaching, advising, research, and ceremony that it embraces are carried out.

What about, however, the other dimensions of an organization: the structures of its practices and the arrangements amid which these practices are carried out? Do they happen? This is not obvious. What, for instance, would it be for a set of understandings, rules, and normative teleological orderings to happen? Of course, items of these sorts govern actions, which do happen. Hence, in addition to the performance of actions, a second facet of the happening of an organization is the governance of action by (elements of) the structures of the organization’s practices. Governance, that is, happens with performance. As for material arrangements, for example a classroom or call center, such arrangements exist and do not happen. Yet, it is not as a conglomeration of existing entities that a material arrangement helps constitute an organization. An arrangement helps constitute an organization as something that houses human activity, that is, because it and
the entities composing it (1) are referred to or used in or (2) causally support the organization’s practices. An example of an arrangement that causally supports many practices is a department or university computer system. Hence, a third aspect of the happening of organizations — in addition to performance and governance — is the material world being taken up in and supporting the performance of the organization’s actions.

So, what is event-like about an organization — what it is for an organization to happen — is for its actions to be performed, for the structures of its practices to govern activity, and for the arrangements amid which these practices are carried out to be involved in and causally support these actions and practices. For reasons that will emerge later, I will treat both the governance of activity and the involvement of arrangements in activity as dimensions of activity and not as events distinct from it. Treating the involvement of the material world as a dimension of activity entails that some events that befall material arrangements are parts of the performances of actions and not events that are distinct from these performances. An example is the heating up of metal, which is part of the performances of such actions as fashioning a horseshoe and making jewelry. An example of an event that is part of an organization but not involved in its activities, at least initially, is a breakdown in the organization’s computer system, which befalls an arrangement that causally supports the organization’s practices. Treating the governance of activity and the involvement of arrangements in activity as facets of activity also indicates that the happening of an organization fundamentally has two components: the performance of its actions and the occurrence of events whereby its arrangements causally support its activities.

Let us now turn to the real time of organizations. What is the real time in which organizations occur and in which — the premise of this workshop — they can be experienced and understood? I will suggest that there are two real times involved, one quite familiar, the other considerably less so. The familiar type of real time is objective, the less familiar one teleological. I will discuss objective real time in detail before turning to real time of the teleological sort.

By ‘objective time’, I mean what is alternatively called the time of the universe, cosmic time, or the time of the world. This category of time is defined by succession, by before and after relations: all events, or temporal positions (moments), occur before and after other events or positions. Time, so understood, is either the before and after ordering of events or the series of moments that occur before and after one another. To occur in objective time is to occupy a place in the sequence of events or moments that constitutes that time.

Many, if not most events are not instantaneous. This means that their occurrence takes time, that is, that their occurrence lays down or coincides with a duration of objective time. Any not instantaneous event thus involves movement, or passage, from commencement to cessation. This movement is real time in the sense of ‘real time’ presently at issue. More specifically, non-instantaneously happening involves passage from a moment that, at the conclusion of the event, is no more, to a moment that, at the inception, was not yet. Writing an email, for instance, takes time: the action begins at a moment that, once the email is written, is no more, and concludes at a moment that, when the email was begun, is not yet, in between going through phases that coincide with a succession of
moments. The difference between objective time and real time of the objective sort must be borne in mind: Whereas objective time is a before and after ordering of events or moments, real time of the objective sort is the passage of a not instantaneous event that is contained in that ordering.

The happening of an organization is, above all, the performance of its constituent actions. The real time in which an organization happens is thus, above all, the varied objective temporal passages that the performances of these actions lay down or coincide with. The real time of an academic department, for example, is all the passages of the performances of its acts of teaching, disciplining, advising, doing research, sending emails, and so on. The real time in which an organization occurs is thus a multiple, motley, and complex affair. No person can experience an organization of any minimal complexity in real time, as it happens. At best, one can experience constituent actions as they happen and make inferences about the remainder.

The real time of an organization is the unfoldings of the performances of the organization’s actions. As noted, these performances are governed by the structures of the organization’s practices and involve the organization’s arrangements. Governance and involvement are one with these performances and are thus present in the real time of an organization. The second component of the real time of an organization is the unfolding of the events by which its arrangements causally support its activity. Note that, in all organizations, the unfoldings of performances and of material events are coordinated or linked with one another and also exhibit temporal features such as rhythm and patterning. To experience an organization in real time is, thus, to experience the movements of its performances and events; to understand an organization in real time is to grasp, explain, or theorize these interrelated and patterned passages.

These comments, I believe, help illuminate what this is, organization as it happens. Somehow, however, they seem incomplete. An organization as it happens is not simply the organization’s happening. For there is more to an organization as it happens than what happens. For instance, an academic department as it happens is not simply the coordinated unfoldings of teaching, advising, research etc. plus the patterned unfoldings of material events that support these, even when the passages of the acts embrace the governance of action and the involvement in them of material arrangements. The department as it happens encompasses the entire structures of its practices as well as further components and features of its material arrangements. (Recall that I have set aside consideration of relations among practices and relations among arrangements.) Even though these wider structures and arrangements are not drawn into this or that performance, they remain constitutive of the organization. An academic department still embraces rules pertaining to the disciplining of students even when students are not being disciplined, just as it includes the end of imparting knowledge even when none of its instructors pursue this. The department also embraces the meeting rooms when they are empty and dark, its computers when they are off, and the computer system at night. To understand an organization as it happens, it is not enough to grasp the happening of the organization. One also has to grasp how things are with the wider organization that is not happening.
Let me focus on the structures of an organization’s practices. As organization actions are performed, how do things stand with those dimensions of these structures that are not involved in the performances? My answer is: they are held in organizational memory.

The idea of social or collective memory has proved increasingly useful in the past two to three decades. The weakest notion of social memory is that of an individual person’s memory depending on and being shaped by social phenomena. It is widely accepted today that the contents and uses of an individual’s memory are shaped by social phenomena such as interaction, media, and ritual. By ‘practice’ or ‘organization’ memory, however, I mean something stronger, namely, memory as a property of a practice or organization.

Some thinkers oppose the extension of the term ‘memory’ from individual people to social entities on the grounds that this extension requires illegitimately ascribing to the social entities credited with memory some social version of mind. And, indeed, some theorists of social memory do make some such ascription. For instance, the theorist who in many ways was the first significant thinker of social memory, Maurice Halbwachs, ascribed memory to groups (Halbwachs 1980). Drawing on Henri Bergson’s (1988) notion of consciousness as duration, Halbwachs treated this memory as an element in the continuity of group duration. This is not the place to consider the aforementioned objection further. For present purposes, this objection can be taken to indicate that practice and organization memory must be so spelled out as not to attribute a reified consciousness or mind to practices and organizations.

Probably the most important contemporary theory of social memory is Jan Assmann’s (1992, 2005) account of collective and cultural memory. Collective memory, for Assmann, is a bonding, or connective, phenomenon: its function is to transmit and sustain a collective identity by outfitting individuals with representations and images of past events that befell the social unit involved. Individual people are the entities who remember in a strict sense, but what they remember is so shaped by the unit’s practices that members of the unit come to share a perspective on the past, to identify with membership, and thereby to be bound to the unit. Cultural memory, meanwhile, is information about the past that is handed down, learned, and stored. It extends beyond de facto collective memory and represents a storehouse of potential collective memories and potential transformations thereof. Cultural memory is largely stored in language.

The connection that Assmann and others see between social memory and social identity intriguingly parallels the connection between personal memory and personal identity that is well known to writers, philosophers, psychologists, and others. The contribution of memory to identity is an important feature of memory. It is wrong, however, to limit the scope of memory to identity-building contents and processes. To see this, consider the three general types of memory: autobiographical memory, cognitive memory, and ability memory. Autobiographical memory is memory of one’s own past, the things that one has done and suffered oneself. Cognitive memory is memory of language and facts: the meanings of words, lines of verse, facts about the world, and so on. Ability memory, finally, is memory of how to do things. That ability memory exists is evidenced by the pervasive practice of saying, and not just in English, that
someone remembers how to do such and such. The memory attested to in such statements is the continuing existence in the present of an ability acquired in the past. ‘I remember how to such and such’ implies that I learned it and can still do it. Cognitive memory, however, has the same structure. To say ‘I remember how high Mt Everest is’ or ‘I remember the opening of “Burnt Norton”’ implies that I learned Everest’s height or the opening of Eliot’s poem and still know it. Two points about memory emerge from this brief consideration of ability and cognitive memory. The first is that memory often has nothing to do with identity. The second is that memory is often the continuation of the past into the present and not, as is often assumed, the past being an object for the present.

As noted, those elements of the structures of an organization’s practices that do not govern the performances of this or that organization action continue to exist during and between these performances. (The same holds of those elements of the organization’s arrangements that are not involved in these performances). This persistence of structure from the past into the present is what I call practice memory. The memory of the organization is the sum of the memories of its practices. An organization can also have a cultural and a collective memory in Assmann’s sense, that is, accumulated knowledge about the organization’s past and that passed-on subset of this knowledge that stabilizes a collective identity for members. Organizations vary, however, in how much cultural and collective memory they possess. All organizations, by contrast, have practice memories, that is, persisting practice structures.

I want now to look at this persistence more carefully. A practice, you will recall, is organized by items of four sorts: (1) practical understandings (complexes of know-hows), (2) rules, (3) a teleological(-affective) structuring, and (4) general understandings. By virtue of what do items of these four types persist? Examples of practical understandings that organize practices in an academic department are an understanding of emailing and an understanding of calculating grades. The persistence of understandings such as these lies in their coming to subtend performances in department practices, for example, those of communication and grading — and not ceasing to do so. For these understandings not to have ceased subtending activity, it is not necessary that participants write emails or calculate grades (or identify cases of either) during any given time period. It is enough if the subsequent writings and calculations they undertake in department contexts are intelligible as such to other participants and that their subsequent identifications of these actions are mutually intelligible. Note, in addition, that in order for an understanding to organize a practice, it is not necessary that all participants in the practice possess it; it is enough if particular groups of participants do so, for example occupants of a given role or status, such as instructor. Of course, if no one emails or calculates, the availability of intelligible acts of emailing and calculating will fade. Manifesting an understanding of and teaching or transmitting it to others are crucial to its remaining part of a practice’s structure. All in all, practice memory qua the persistence of acquired understandings of X-ing and Y-ing into the present is the continuing availability of mutually intelligible performances and identifications of X-ing and Y-ing, which availability is maintained by actions and interactions — including communicative actions — within the practice.
The second component of practice memory is the persistence of rules. The persistence of rules is the continuing availability of rule-following actions that are intelligible as such to participants in the practice or to certain groups thereof. For instance, the persistence of a rule governing the disciplining of students as a structural feature of academic practices is the continuing availability in these practices of instructors’ actions that follow it and are intelligible as such to other participants. This continuing availability is secured, in turn, by an amalgam of phenomena such as formulating and affirming rules, admonishing and sanctioning others to obey them, persuading others that this is how they should act, teaching others to obey them, and being prepared to do these things. This second component of practice memory is thus maintained via persisting inscriptions of rules (e.g. in documents) in conjunction with a complex of linguistic and non-linguistic actions, thoughts, and readinesses that are distributed among practice participants, often according to roles and statuses. Similar comments apply to the third and fourth components of practice memory: the memory of acceptable and enjoined teleological orders (acceptable and enjoined combinations of ends, projects, and actions) and the memory of general understandings. Both memories are secured via complexes of actions, thoughts, and readinesses that are differentially distributed among participants in the practice: actions that pursue acceptable or enjoined orderings or that manifest general understandings; thoughts, discussions, and negotiations about which orderings are acceptable or enjoined or about what general understandings entail; all the sorts of acts of admonishment and sanction and readinesses thereto that contribute to the memory of rules; and feelings of satisfaction at certain events and distress at others.

To sum up, practice memory is the persistence of the structure of a practice. Its content, this structure, is a complex of practical understandings, rules, teleological orderings, and general understandings. This memory is also a feature of the practice involved, not an aggregation of features of participants in it, for instance an aggregation of individual memories. What in individual people corresponds to the structure of a practice are different combinations of versions, or incarnations, of structural understandings, rules, and teleologies. Practice memory is not equivalent to the continuing existence of these incarnations. Nor is it secured by their continuing existence. It is secured, instead, by a status-, experience- and position-based distribution among participants of actions, thoughts, experiences, and readinesses that express these incarnations or focus on and react to their expressions. Practice memory is an interactionally maintained feature of practices.

An organization as it happens embraces both the happening of the organization, that is, the carrying out of its practices, and practice memory, that is, the persistence of these practices’ structures when they are not effective in the organization’s happening. Practice memory, in turn, rests on a complex of actions, thoughts, abilities, and readinesses. Since both the performances that constitute the happening of the organization and the phenomena that maintain memory are spread through time, understanding an organization as it happens requires considerable grasp of its past.

I will be briefer regarding an organization’s arrangements. How is it with those components of an organization’s arrangements that are not involved in
particular activities as those activities are carried out? The answer to this question falls out of the answer to the following one: What is the difference between an entity that is not part of an organization’s material arrangements, say, the staircase to the university gym, and an entity that is part of these arrangements but is not involved in organization actions, say, the unoccupied office in the corner of the department? There is no single general answer to this question. The difference might lie in entities, such as the unoccupied office, that are part of the organization’s arrangements, but not involved in its actions, being relevant to organizational actions, being part of arrangements that were set up as part of the organization, or playing a direct causal role in either maintaining the arrangements or in subtending the organization’s actions. An example of the last would be the department computer network doing scheduled tasks at night. (Earlier, I described events befalling organizational arrangements that causally support an organization’s activities as the second dimension of the happening of an organization.) I can summarize this by saying that the difference between not being part of an organization’s material arrangements and being part of them but not drawn into activity lies in the latter but not the former potentially being involved in or actually or potentially supporting organizational activities. Hence, another dimension of an organization as it happens is the potential involvement of its material arrangements in, and the actual as well as potential underwriting by these arrangements of, the organization’s activities. Material arrangements and causal infrastructure also play a considerable role in organization memory, for instance by facilitating the complex of actions, experiences, and so on that maintains memory.

Hence, in sum, an organization as it happens embraces (1) the happening of the organization in real time, the unfoldings of the performances of its actions; (2) organization memory, the persistence of organization structure from the past into the present together with the complex of actions, thoughts, experiences, abilities, and readinesses that secures this memory; (3) the potential involvement of material orders in the performances that are the future happening of the organization; and (4) the causal infrastructure that supports the happening and memory of the organization.

I mentioned earlier that there is a second real time in which organizations occur. I call this time ‘the time of activity’. My account of it is an interpretation of Heidegger’s concept of existential temporality in Being and Time (Heidegger 1962). I note that the idea of a time of activity is heir to a tradition, originating with Augustine, that embraces the idea of a human time. In the 20th century, this tradition was perpetuated by conceptions of lived, experiential, existential, and activity time. Each of these ties a type of time to human life, experience, existence, or activity and contrasts this time with objective time.

The time of activity is not, like objective time, a figure or configuration of succession. It is characterized, instead, by past, present, and future. Of course, past, present, and future also characterize events. Events are ordered as past, present, and future in that, at any moment, some events no longer occur, others are occurring, and still others have not yet occurred. The past, present, and future that compose the time of activity, however, do not order events. Rather, they are dimensions of human activity. An important difference between past,
present, and future events and the past, present, and future of activity is that the
former form a succession whereas the latter do not follow one another; instead,
they occur together, at one stroke. The past of human activity is not something
that no longer exists, that trails off behind the present, just like the future of
activity is not something that does not yet exist, that hovers before the present.
Past, present, and future occur together.

Heidegger’s analysis of this time is found in his interpretation of human exis-
tence as being-in-the-world. He develops this interpretation by characterizing
being-in-the-world as projecting, thrown being-amidst entities. Projection,
thrownness, and being-amidst are the future, past, and present, respectively, of
activity. Projection is acting for the sake of a possible way of being. When
people act, they do so for the sake of some way of being (e.g. being a success-
ful teacher, being fair) — toward which they come in acting. This projecting–
coming toward is the future dimension of activity. Thrownness, meanwhile, is
people being such that certain states of affairs and not others matter to them.
When something matters to someone, that person’s actions reflect, respond to,
and/or are otherwise sensitive to it. It is something given, from which he or she
departs in acting. This departing–coming from is the past dimension of activity.
Being amidst, finally, is having to do with entities, that is, being engaged in the
world: acting toward, with, and amid entities. A person, when acting, is always
stretched between that toward which that person is coming and that from which
he or she is departing. This stretched-outness is the opening up of the future,
present, and past of activity.

This structure can be described in more familiar terms. The future dimension
of activity, coming toward something projected, is acting for an end. The past
dimension of activity, departing from something given, is responding to some-
thing or acting in the light of it, i.e. being motivated. The present of activity is
activity itself. The time of activity is, thus, acting toward an end from what
motivates. It is a teleological phenomenon.

The performance of action, thus, has two times: an objective time and an activ-
ity time. Its objective time is its position before and after other events, whereas
its activity time is its stretched-outness between that toward which the actor
comes and that to which he or she goes back. This duality doubles the ways in
which action is performed — and can be experienced and understood — in real
time. The objective real time in which an action is performed is the unfolding of
its performance. By contrast, the activity real time in which an action is per-
formed is the structure of the performance itself, its stretched-outness between
end and motive. Real time of the activity sort is the co-occurrence of past, pre-
sent, and future, the togetherness of past and future in activity. The happening
that is the performance of action is at once an unfolding in objective time and a
joining of the teleological past, present, and future.

Organizations have properties, not just of objective, but also of activity real
time. The activity real time of an organization is the co-occurrences of past, pre-
sent, and future in the organization’s actions, the joinings of past and future in
the performances of these actions. I mentioned earlier, in passing, that the
objective real times of organization actions are typically coordinated or interre-
lated. This coordination and interrelation often rests on the coordination, mutual
dependence, and mutual determination of the teleological pasts and futures — the ends, purposes, and motivations — of these actions; this is true, for example, of the coordinated actions of department chair and department secretary and of the coordinated actions of colleagues at a department meeting. Fully understanding the real time in which an organization occurs requires grasping this nexus of pasts and futures.

What about the structures of organization practices and the arrangements amid which these practices transpire? The rules, teleological orderings, and general understandings that structure an organization’s practices partly, even fully, fill out the activity pasts and futures of the organization’s actions. What I mean is that both the matters given which and the ways of being for the sake of which members perform organizational actions belong to these structures. Teachers, for instance, discipline students because of certain rules or general understandings of propriety. Teachers and students also pursue enjoined or acceptable ends and projects, such as teaching critical thinking, pursuing a degree, leading discussion groups, and working together. Because the structures of an organization’s practices fill out the pasts and futures of its actions, understanding the organization in real time demands grasping these structures. Furthermore, as discussed, those elements of an organization’s structure that do not fill out the teleological pasts and futures of given organization actions are carried in the organization’s memory. As a result, organizational memory contains potential activity pasts and futures beyond the pasts and futures of its actual actions. The totality of these is not open to every or even to any single member of the organization. Rather, different pasts and futures are open to different members depending on such matters as status, experience, abilities, current position in objective time or in space, and the people with whom and in relation to whom a person acts. Availability is also keyed to those actions, thoughts, experiences, and readinesses of particular members that are part of the overall complex of such phenomena that maintains organization memory.

Similar remarks apply to arrangements: states of affairs that pertain to arrangements can fill out the teleological pasts and futures of organization actions. Material arrangements thus represent a second source of potential pasts and futures, the availability of which is differentially distributed among organization members.

To summarize, the real times in which an organization occurs are the unfoldings of, along with the joinings of past and future in, the performances of the organization’s actions. Objective real time also includes the unfoldings of events by which material arrangements causally support organization activities. To understand an organization as it happens is to grasp these unfoldings and joinings. An organization, however, is not exhausted by its actions and those components of its structures and arrangements that are incorporated into the performances of its actions. An organization also has a memory whose content is these structures and that contains potential teleological pasts and futures for organization members. An organization, in addition, embraces a corpus of material arrangements that support or are taken up in activity and provide further possible pasts and futures for members. To understand an organization as it happens demands not just a grasp of both the unfolding of the organization in
objective time and the joining of past, present, and future in activity time, but, in addition, an appreciation of the nexus of material arrangements in which its practices proceed and an understanding of its memory and the interactional complex that effects this memory.

Note

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