

Book Review

François-Xavier DeVaujany, Jeremy Aroles, Mar Péretz (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of phenomenologies and organization studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023

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1. Phenomenology and Organization studies: a possible dialogue?

Edited in 2023 by François-Xavier De Vaujany, Jeremy Aroles and Mar Pérezts, *The Oxford handbook of phenomenologies and organisation studies* sets up a dialogue between phenomenology and management and organization studies (MOS), moving, however, from a theoretical conviction whose reconstructive character differentiates it from other handbooks.

Unlike other disciplinary fields (psychiatry, biology, sociology), where phenomenological instruments of investigation enjoy an extensive and already consolidated literature of reference, in the field of studies dedicated to management and organizations, recourse to phenomenological semantics has not enjoyed the same fortune, sometimes becoming the object of strong ostracism. Moreover, according to the editors of this Handbook MOS area scholars report that phenomenology, its tools, practices and any theoretical issues pertaining to them received little or no attention, so that attempts to make it a relevant theoretical ground were unsuccessful. The editors and authors of the various contributions collected in the text have a different perspective.

According priority to the phenomenological concept of appearance, and of its dialectic movement of veiling unveiling, the authors claim that phenomenology has the ability to “llow us to ‘see’ things in a different light, to uncover what is invisible, concealed, or hidden from our consideration by our theoretical or ideological assumptions and habits” (1), defining itself, therefore, as a valuable source of knowledge for managerial and organisational studies, especially where the latter need to interface with peculiar demands of justice, ethic and epistemology. According to Merlaeu-Ponty ([1945] 2014), in fact, recognising that the movement of veiling and unveiling which characterises sensible appearances is not a denial of truth, but rather an unfolding of it, constitutes the radically revolutionary import of the phenomenological inheritance.

The gradual dissemination of writings and debates conducted within the MOS field of study, following a re-evaluation of the phenomenological theoretical framework, convinced the editors of having reached “that the maturity of discussions and the times called for an overarching volume dedicated to bringing together these multifaceted debates, to explore their intersections, tensions, and horizons” (15).

In not configuring itself as a mere reconstructive operation, then, this Handbook takes on the characteristics of “a process [...] involved in identifying a variety of phenomenological debates

and topics as they appear or could appear in the MOS literature” (15). We might say that the premise upon which this theoretical work has been developed is clear: preventing phenomenology from being exploited, obviating an 'extractive' and unidirectional theoretical drawing practice, which, the editors hold, has characterised the recourse of MOS scholars to other theoretical sources. So that, by reversing the initial question, the editors come to ask “what, if anything, can a predominantly empirical field of research bring to a discipline of philosophy solely concerned, if we are to believe Deleuze, in the creation of concepts? (704), thus initiating that circular movement in which the processual nature of the work is made explicit. In fact, radicalising the relationship and interconnections between these two areas of investigation means making a move with important theoretical implications whose reverberations act on both. The circularity thus grafted, in fact, not only leads to read organizational phenomena through the lens of conceptual tools that one would simply transpose from one disciplinary sphere to another, but also to re-read phenomenology itself.

Through an act of decentralisation from its place of origin, phenomenology reveals itself to be a practice that arises, in turn, from the very heart of the object and processes it aims to interrogate. For Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2018), in fact, recovering the intrinsic relationality of the relationship between the human and world – which phenomenology encompasses as a 'phenomenal field' – allows, on the one hand, to re-establish the sensible as the priority, and, on the other, to acknowledge the life-giving, dynamic character of paradoxicality that characterises the world of *doxa*.

Overcoming the divide between subject and object of knowledge occurs, then, by recovering a temporal 'precessuality' that makes it impossible to establish an absolute *primum* while, at the same time, entailing a renunciation of a verticalised relationship between disciplines. For the editors, phenomenology is itself, first of all, “a movement paradoxically overcoming itself continuously through its outgrowths [...] and numerous intersections with other fields” (p. 13). The editors want to offer an image of the complexity and plurality of this movement, in which 'paradoxicality' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) becomes a vivifying principle, where action explicates itself into the pluralistic perspective that the editors adopt.

Structured in five sections, or blocks as I shall call them, the volume explores the phenomenological movement from different angles and implications.

The first on “Phenomenologies and beyond: origins, extensions and discontinuities” (Chapters One through Eleven) offers a systematic overview of some of the major phenomenological trends.

The second, “The Experience of Organizing: Embodiment, Robots, and Affects in a Digital World” (Chapters 12 through 20), builds on the first to look at some of the main issues in the contemporary MOS debate, *i.e.* embodiment/disembodiment, automation, body at work, instincts, and intuitions. The third block, “Events and Organizing: Acceleration, Disruptions, and Decentering of Management” (Chapters 21 through 28), continues exploring the themes of events and organizing and considers issues such as time, temporalities, eventfulness, depth, openness, passivities, institutions, connectivity, remote work, distributed and decentred modes of organizing, leadership, silence.

The fourth and last block on “Togetherness, Memory, and Instruments: Algorithms, Gestures, and Marginality in Organizing” (Chapters 29 through 34) discusses the social and political implications of organisations. Themes such as organizational memory, organizational

memorialisation, managerial instruments, scientific instruments, atmosphere, returns to communities, models of collective activity, algorithms and their role in society are addressed.

The volume closes with a conclusion and an overview on the path the editors and authors of the volume followed.

The overall frame that editors and authors have achieved is particularly suitable to cross-referencing within the text. As the block architecture clearly shows, it does not objectify in airtight compartments the strong interrelation among the themes discussed. Instead, as per its scope, it restores the organic image of the tension that holds together the plurality of debates that the different sections analyse. In line with paradoxical movement that from Merleau-Ponty on inaugurated philosophical questioning, this Handbook works on reconstructing the silent dialogue that runs through all the sections and keeps revealing new unity and connections of sense.

So, to delve into some of this volume's key issues, I will rely on appearances, temporality and ontology to guide the way.

2. Appearances, temporality and ontology: three constellations to navigate the phenomenological archipelago

In this section I explore the theoretical implications that a phenomenological approach to MOS studies entails. In line with the authors' intention to recover the simultaneous action of the objective side, constituted by the socio-materiality of organisational processes, and of the subjective side of intentionality, in the phenomenological elaboration of the concept of 'appearance' we may grasp the constellation towards the main road through which we may get to conceive organizational processes and managerial practices in a new way. The need, in fact, of having to rearrange how organizations and organizational practices connect and interrelate is strictly related to the necessity of rediscovering the terrain of 'lived experience'.

As Harmut Rosa writes in the *Preface*, in fact "organizations would be 'dead structures' devoid of any action without the actions of subjects as centres of experience: it is their motivational energy [...] that ultimately serves as the motor and fuel of institutional life" (V). Recovering the phenomenal experience makes grasping subject and object in a single recursive process possible and what this process reveals is both the intimate interrelationship of the terms in question and their reversibility. The experience of the 'touched hand and touching hand' that Husserl recalled, for example, lets us grasp a single relational structure in which the two terms mutually exchange roles of subjective and objective pole. Indeed "There is no divide between subjects and objects. What is real [...] is just the set of relations at the stake in the process of becoming" (701). Splitting the objective and subjective aspects of organizational and managerial processes into two distinct dimensions constitutes an abstraction that pertains to a later plane of conceptualization since it may only be realized by adhering to that "flyover consciousness" that loosens itself from the world of lived experience. The concept of appearance, instead, carries with it the idea that subject and object, consciousness and world come simultaneously into being and are thus constantly intertwined. Recovering the intentional dimension of the lived experience enables us to understand the actual role that it plays in determining the organisational dimension. The socio-material dimension in which organizational processes and managerial practices take place would not otherwise be fully comprehensible through an act of abstraction from how it manifests itself to subjectivities and

their own reasons, desires, affects and perceptions. Understanding this dimension, in other words, can only occur by being in, and, by being part of, its living dimension and concrete becoming.

We are thus led to the second conceptual plexus, that of temporality. Through a fine reconstruction of the polysemy that characterises the concept of appearance, the editors lead us to view it in a new light, or rather, in terms of *duration*. The process of organising, once it is brought back to the terrain of pure appearance, can be grasped as an intentional act or as a plurality of acts added to the flow of conscious activities. Recovering the conceptual elaboration of time as a 'living present' allows us to conceive of organizations and organising in another way: "organising can also become a projection. Far beyond bodies, organisations, and instruments as 'containers', management is projected. All managers are in the world ahead of them, this future will soon become a past, it is the ground of our present. Reality is the flow itself" (701). Organising can thus be seen as the whole process of becoming, as it "happens in the thickness of this momentum, between the future and the past where we carve out the depth of our present. Managing is all about articulating and linking past and future events more or less openly and fluidly in the flow of collective activities" (*ibidem*). The time of the living present continuously opens up through events. Indeed "beyond bodies, flesh, and instruments, the whole metaphysical world is at stake in organising. Sensibilities, affects, emotions, all can be events or consequences of some events [...] The difference in their duration, speed, and fold, produces the possibilities of management and organising" (*ibidem*). In this regard, the Husserlian concept of temporality lends itself as a valuable tool in reading and understanding organizational issues (Husserl, [1905] 1990). As Elen Riot rightly observes in her chapter *Husserl. Reason and Emotions in philosophy* (38-56), Husserl has long been neglected by MOS scholars, relying instead on other lines and interpretations of the phenomenological movement. Nevertheless, the Husserlian position is particularly fruitful to understand and orient collective actions in view of their temporal situatedness and to understand how to articulate again all that connects reason and feeling, especially in an era dangerously marked by the re-emergence of strong irrationalist tendencies. As Riot affirms in her fine contribution:

Husserl's approach to time may be translated with profit to the domain of organisation studies, as time is also a collective property constituted through historical time (the ground norm) and turned towards future possible orientations (the horizon). [...] Considering the horizon of an act of consciousness means allowing that the object of consciousness also has possible properties and relations beyond those explicitly presented in the act as long as those properties are compatible with the content or noematic sense of the act. This leads to the various roles of imagination in relation to sensations and emotions, a subject that is at the centre of Husserl's philosophy and what he leaves us with today (51).

Time is thus understood as an operation of collective knowledge that may require complex mechanisms of interpretation and of comprehension, especially where norms and choices for future scenarios are involved. Husserl's contribution ([1929] 1960), which attributes a relevant role to the concept of reason, albeit inserted within a more stratified vision of subjectivity, can instead, effectively, be recovered to interface with a series of challenges and problems discussed within the MOS field of study. As Riot emphasises, the Husserlian attempt to trace a unitary and foundational structure for knowledge as a whole can effectively act as a counterforce to the dispersion and hardening of disciplinary fields that characterises the

present era. Recovering the inaugural dimension of the perceptual and affective dimensions, however, allows us to rediscover their cognitive bearing instead of their being assumed as obstacles to reason. This circular movement brings us to the last constellation on our reconstruction and conceptual questioning journey, that of ontology.

Indeed, understanding organizations through the phenomenological lens and by gradually reinstating the bodily dimension, which is also ontological, means redefining and understanding what role the various social actors play. Working out an embodied and, thus, stratified subjectivity, the path is paved towards recovering not only the cognitive bearing of the affective and perceptual dimension, but also all those forms of subjectivity whom the ratiocentric model has until now confined to marginal roles. One such call is made by Géraldine Paring in *Animal Ontologies Phenomenological Insights for Posthumanist Research*, in which relying on the phenomenological approach, she reassesses the role and status that animals within organizations. She affirms: “another position of knowledge to better assess the reality of human-animal relationships with organisations has been embodied research, seen as disruptive of anthropocentrism to redefine the human subject in relation to animals to show the multiple embodied and affective connections” (p. 388). Recognizing that the body plays a pivotal role, that subjectivity is layered, and that contingency (in its links to the spatial and temporal structure of the event) brings with it risks allows us to affirm that vulnerability and fragility have a similar space in the whole that constitutes the human experience. This consideration, in turn, invites us to reflect on the bond that the human experience shares with other living forms, which ought to be accorded equal dignity.

At this regard, theorists of phenomenological enactivism (Carbone, 2004; Zahavi, 2018) are enlivening reflections that, starting from ‘embodied consciousness’, tend to rethink in ‘circular’ terms the complex ways in which technological devices and patterns of subjective experience relate to one another. Through a physiological reading of the transcendental, that tends to identify it with body and its functions without falling back into a form of naive naturalism, and through a rethinking of consciousness as ‘being-in-the-world’, they recompose the nexus between nature and artificiality, with the latter as a natural extension of corporeality whose abilities act as a source of symbolisation and signification of the world.

Technological devices, as well as the activities classically identifiable as ‘mental’, are grasped as true instruments of cognition insofar as subjectivity escapes its solipsistic confinement, which would see it separated from the world, to show itself intrinsically intertwined with things themselves.

The decentralisation of the disciplines, the impossibility of establishing a verticalised foundational link is thus counterbalanced by a decentralisation of the human and of ratiocentric subjectivity, in favour of other forms of living beings. The attempt to restore a link between two seemingly distant disciplinary areas, looks to this branch of philosophical thought as the mean through which to mend the rather old rift that has crept in-between thought and life based on their alleged opposition. It means, in other words, seeking a thought that, rising from the very heart of practices, ultimately becomes life itself.

In the light of this theoretical background, it would seem, then, that there be no room left for phenomenology. In the face of the theoretical demands posed by the debates concerning posthumanism, and, the increasingly pressing need to redefine man's relationship with the environment in the age of the Anthropocene, the ‘radicalism’ that, in the past, was intended to

be attributed to it, would seem to have definitively deflagrated in the face of its reduction to a mere object of study of interest to historians of thought or a niche of enthusiasts.

And yet, the ever-growing literature on the subject, as well as the various strands of research within it, would seem to disavow this apparent philosophical retreat, showing, to the contrary, its liveliness and vitality to our days. The editors of this Handbook have shown themselves to be aware of this ability in their attempt to test its efficacy. Therefore, this Handbook can be intended as an indication of a future path for scholars in the organisational and managerial sphere.

Keywords

phenomenology, organizations and management studies, subjectivity, ontology, temporality

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