The term ‘organizational spaces’ immediately conjures up images of office-buildings and meeting rooms. However, in an age which is said to be marked by ‘the demise of the office’ (Veldhoen and Piepers 1993), which coincides with a range of initiatives varying from flexible workspaces, teleworking and virtual organizations, ‘organizational space’ is far less fixed by a single iconography. The articles writing about specific organizational spaces in this volume implicitly rely on notions of social spatialization that make the ‘organizational’ aspect of space more prominently visible. That is to say, they no longer accept the premise that spaces are already organized in their architectural realization, but only through their inhabitation can we speak of ‘organizational spaces’ (see Roderick 1999; see Space & Culture 3). Hence what is at stake is the spatial organization or ordering. Moreover, with the arrival of telematics, these orderings no longer pay reverence to the originary blueprint of molar spatiality (i.e. that of confined, self-enclosed spaces – see Deleuze 1992), but instead have embraced more open, network-type, forms of spatialization. One of the most salient forms of spatialization is the virtual organization, which through outsourcing and telematics, has enabled a form of ordering that takes place everywhere, whilst itself being virtually nowhere.

From the contributions to this volume, we learn that spatial organization is an accomplishment of several kinds of actors, an insight which is made famous by Actor Network Theory (Latour 1993). If it were not for the persistent popularity of Actor Network Theory (ANT), the term ‘network’ would already have lost its theoretical appeal for those interested in culture. Made popular in the late 1980s by organizational studies and political science, ‘network’ became a concept that enabled fashionable theories to embrace the emergent appeal of fluidity, openness and flexibility, whilst continuing to work with an allusion to structure (cf. Jarillo 1988; Ohmae 1989, see Hay 1996). In particular with the publication of Manuel Castells’ Rise of the Network Society (1996), network-theory became firmly established as a mainstream force in contemporary political economy. However, Castells’ almost uncompromising economism which is seductively intertwined with an ethos of technological determinism, made it difficult for those bending towards more cultural analytical orientations to continue to engage productively with this concept. Instead, refuge was being sought in the more elusive and complex Deleuzoguattarian concept of ‘assemblage’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; see Space and Culture 8 forthcoming). Especially when teamed up with their
concept of flow (which is rather different from Castells’—see Shields 1997), assemblage offers a less neo-structuralist and what we might call sociologistic plane of immanence (e.g. Regulation Theory cf. Jessop 1990; theories of ‘flexible accumulation’ cf. Harvey 1989; and system’s theory cf. Luhmann 1990). Such a plane of immanence is a set of conceptual associations formed around an invisible ‘core’ of basic assumptions which displace the question of ‘what is the social?’ by asserting a notion of ‘society’ as always-already ‘there’, in terms of a pre-existing choreography of rules, norms, values, interests and institutions which govern all enactments and embodiments of ‘presence’ (e.g. Giddens 1984). The only difference with traditional structuralism is that rather than seen as an epiphenomenon of pre-existing eternal myths (or binary structures), such a plane of immanence engenders a mythical allusion to ‘historicity’ as that which explains everything that has come into being ‘as-it-is’. There is neither room for ambivalence other than contradiction, nor for the unconscious, the spiritual, the mystical or the divine beyond their alleged social functionality. Whereas this sociologistic plane of immanence understands ‘becoming’ in terms of sustainability (i.e. its main questions are whether and how a network can sustain itself, maintain a presence) the concept of assemblage opens up a different plane of immanence that emphasizes emergence and disappearance. Its main questions are whether and how a network comes into being, unfolds, transforms, erodes and vanishes as a multiplicity of ‘presents/presences’.

Somewhere between the political-economic notion of ‘network’ and the differentialist notion of ‘assemblage’, we can find ‘actor networks’. Actor networks are more dynamic than network structures, but less elusive than assemblages. They are ensembles of humans, animals, technologies and gods, aimed at the stabilization of particular environments, through the fixation of specific objects as ‘immutable mobiles’ which enable particular frameworks of encoding and decoding to be kept at specific ‘nodes’. The main motivation of these actors is survival, if not expansion, and on this count, ANT is closer to political economy than to differentialism (for which the main driving forces are becoming and disappearance). However, actor networks are (temporary) accomplishments that remain vulnerable to disintegration, dysfunctionality and disorder; they exist on the basis of arbitrary closures. In this sense, they are more like assemblages, as the strategies deployed by its various members are not controlled by some invisible structural force (such as capitalism).

Indeed, one of the most attractive features of ANT is that there are implicit but unmistakable traces of Deleuzoguattarian inspiration, particularly in the writings of Bruno Latour. Yet, at the same time, the strong commitment to engendering descriptions of the ordinary, everyday life practices of scientists, engineers, fishermen, accountants, doctors and patients on an ethnographic basis enabled a much wider participation of researchers than those who remained faithful to the various post-structuralist orthodoxies. In contrast to the work of Deleuze, or for that matter Foucault, ANT does not require lengthy introductions and does not invite reverent or polemic exegeses. Yet, at the same time, ANT has established its own vocabulary, rites de passage and research ethos. This means that anyone wanting to ‘do ANT’ (as there is no point in talking about it without ‘doing it’), has to be properly initiated. One must acquire the codes of ‘ANT-speak’ to be accepted (or
condemned) as ‘one of them’. The academic world of ANT is true to its own theory – it consists of a multiplicity of strategies to establish itself as a network, including the various practices of boundary-management, fact-fixing, secret coding and selective co-optation.

What unites the works of Castells, Latour and Deleuze & Guattari on networks is that they are all hinged on a strong materialism, not the Marxist variant (which after all is only an ideology of materialism), but one which grounds its sense of social organization and ordering in concrete, everyday flows of matter and energy. Of course, the objects in Castells’ networks are or a different kind than those deployed by Latour, which in turn are quite different from those mobilized by Deleuze & Guattari; yet, at the same time, they share a similar vitalism and autonomy, granted to them by an understanding of technology that is fundamentally anti-instrumentalist. Such notions of network are very close to currently used conceptions of flow (see Space & Culture 1). As with flow, the materiality of networks acquires a radical autonomy in the sense that it defies all attempts to enclose it within any particular system, be it of the state or of capital. This thus enables analyses of social ordering and social organization to defer questions of functionality (i.e. why?) and instead focus on those of operational logic (i.e. how?). Moreover, like flow, the aforementioned concepts of network are inherently spatial; they draw attention to the spatiality or ordering and organization.

The articles assembled in this double-issue volume all share this principle commitment to rendering particular spaces descriptable as particular ‘orderings’. Although they may not anchor this commitment in any particular theory of (actor-) network or assemblage, what stands out is that there remains an acute perceptiveness of the inherent frailty of social organization. Instead of pre-given ‘orders’, structured by capitalism, patriarchy, the state, ideology or any other trans-spatial concept, the articles take spatiality highly seriously. Even the most elusive of spaces, i.e. cyberspace, which to date is still limited to a mainly textual-visual domain of signification, has to be understood as an ensemble of matter/energy flows, including those of signification, that spatialize ‘the present’ (presence) as a potentiality between the possible and the actual. Only in its elusiveness can this present/presence be understood as produced by multiple orderings. By remaining faithful to the problematic of descriptability, the articles in this volume reveal the inherent instability, which is not removed but simply supplemented by specific networks.

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References


