

What is alternative organization? Theorizing counter-hegemonic dynamics

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What qualifies a given organization as “alternative”? Alternative organizations scholarship has emerged as a distinct subfield of management and organization studies in recent decades, focused on empirical contexts including social movement organizations, cooperatives, intentional communities, maker spaces, alternative food networks, etc. (Parker et al., 2014; Phillips & Jeanes, 2018; Just, de Cock & Schaefer, 2021). These forms of organizing seem to diverge from the mainstream in their unusual commitment to principles like autonomy, solidarity, responsibility, frugal abundance, conviviality, care, or relocalization (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2021; Daskalaki, Fotaki & Sotiropoulou, 2019; Meira, 2014; Parker et al., 2014) and associated uncommon organizational structures and practices such as self-management, horizontal decision-making, open meetings, or artistic self-expression (e.g., Bryer, 2020; Kokkinidis, 2015; Reedy, King & Coupland, 2016; Reinecke, 2018). Rather than a clear definition, however, these clusters of characteristics seem to add up to a “you know it when you see it” test for whether a given organization can be considered “alternative”. We believe such a loose characterization of alternative organizing is simultaneously too expansive and too narrow.

First, the characterization is perhaps too expansive, given that at least some of these characteristics could be claimed by mainstream forms of organizing (e.g., the self-management practised in holacratic for-profit enterprises – Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Such inclusivity may even run the risk of enabling the cooptation of our research by hegemonic actors – we have seen, for instance, hypercapitalist enterprises like Uber and Airbnb positioning themselves as “alternative” by aligning themselves with the “sharing economy” and emphasizing the “autonomy” they offer workers (Ossewaarde & Reijers, 2017). Similarly, if an organization is considered alternative simply if it displays some number of the above characteristics, on what grounds do we exclude from consideration various modes of Alt-Right organizing (du Plessis & Husted, 2022)? Alternative organizations scholarship is not merely interested in forms

organizing that are unusual, but rather those that run counter to political hegemony in some manner (Esper et al., 2017; Zanoni, 2020).

Second, the above loose characterization is at the same time too narrow in that it will tend to reproduce the preconceptions of those with power within our corner of the academy, who are still disproportionately based in the Global North, white, male, cisgender, etc. (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010; Gopal, 2021; Vijay, 2023). By recognizing only those forms of alternative organizing that immediately conform to the expectations of these powerful actors, we risk overlooking important alternatives already in our midst – for instance, peasant and indigenous organizations (Guimarães & Wanderley, 2022), indigenous entrepreneurship initiatives (Peredo, 2023), anti-corporate LGBT organizing (Just, Christensen & Schwarzkopf, 2023), and bottom-up but state-instituted women’s empowerment programmes (Kandathil & Chennangodu, 2020).

These neglected forms of alternative organizing systematically diverge from their more well-studied counterparts not just due to the specificities of the sociopolitical contexts in which they emerge, but also due to the different epistemologies they reflect (Contu, 2020; Muzanhenhamo & Chowdhury, 2023; Spivak, 1988). We wager that there are many more existing alternatives that could enrich our understanding of the dynamics of counter-hegemonic organizing, but recognizing these alternatives requires disrupting the “epistemologies of the North” that erase praxis and theory developed in territories and communities subjected to colonization and exploitation (Escobar, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2020). Many such examples offer alternatives to hegemonic discourses of sustainable development, for instance, emerging from struggles to reconnect with nature and reconstruct communal space rooted in philosophical approaches including Buen Vivir (*Sumak Kawsay*) in the Andean countries of South America, Comunalidad in Oaxaca, Mexico, Ubuntu and related concepts in African thought, the Pachamama of South American Indigenous peoples, and Vikalp Sangam and Dalit philosophies in India, as well as non-Occidental forms of thought regarding modernity in the West (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

The dual shortcomings of our current loose characterization demonstrate the political stakes of specifying, or failing to specify, what counts as alternative organizing. If, for instance, alternative organizations are defined substantively, specifically in terms of divergence from the hegemonic capitalist, white-supremacist, colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative and anthropocentric social order, is our scholarship’s contribution to these political struggles necessarily enhanced? Or do we risk missing strategically important forms of organizing that emerge in unexpected places, such as corporations or the party political system (Husted, 2021; Skoglund & Böhm, 2019)? What might be the political consequences of defining alternative organizing formally instead (Dahlman et al., 2022; Spicer & Alvesson, 2024)? For example, if alternativity is defined in opposition to a relatively dominant social order, *whatever* that order may be (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022; du Plessis & Just, 2022; Kandathil, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2024), do we risk undermining the critical potential of alternative organizations scholarship (Kothari et al., 2019; Shanahan, 2024)?

With this call for papers we hope to gather contributions, addressed to the community of alternative organization scholarship, that wrestle with such political implications and, on this basis, offer perspectives on the question of how alternative organizing *should* be understood. We are particularly interested in receiving submissions that reflect subaltern epistemologies that may reveal emancipatory possibilities beyond those apprehensible within Western thought (Banerjee, 2022), as well as contributions that build upon theory and praxis developed in the Global South (Varman & Vijay, 2022) and within marginalized communities of all types (Bastien, Caraiola & Foster, 2023; Benschop, 2021; Couto, Honorato & de Pádua, 2012; Cutcher & Dale, 2023; Manning, 2021; Nkomo, 2021). Additionally, perspectives that focus on alternative organizing for social transformation efforts, particularly regarding biodiversity and climate crises (Munshi et al., 2022; Roux-Rosier, Azambuja & Islam, 2018; Satgar, 2018) are highly encouraged, along with explorations of the novel epistemologies that these may entail (Banerjee & Arjalies, 2021; Campbell, McHugh & Dylan-Ennis, 2019; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2024).

We also welcome submissions that address methodological concerns specific to the study of alternative organizations including, for instance, critical reflections on the onto-epistemology of alternative organization scholarship (e.g., Dixit, 2023). We invite empirical papers, critical literature reviews, conceptual essays, and contributions that assume a more activist approach in accordance with the ‘Acting Up!’ section of *Organization* (Prichard & Benschop, 2018). Specific questions contributors may wish to address include but are certainly not limited to:

- What alternative forms of organizing can be identified beyond the limits of the usual empirical contexts listed above, and how would recognizing these *as* alternatives enhance the theory and praxis of alternative organizations scholarship?
- Against the “you know it when you see it” clusters of characteristics mentioned above, what could be a more politically and epistemically robust definition of alternative organizing?
- What valuable conceptualizations of alternative organizing might be developed when organizational scholars make use of theories and epistemologies from the margins, such as decolonial, feminist, Indigenous and queer theories?
- What ethical challenges arise in the course of research engagement with alternative organizations, specifically, and how might we cope with these challenges methodologically?
- What vocabularies for counter-hegemonic organizing might be developed when we overcome a reliance on Western epistemologies? What research strategies for exploring alternative organizations empirically are enabled by non-hegemonic epistemologies?

- What is the relationship between alternative organizations and “mainstream” hegemonic organizations? How can counter-hegemonic forms of organizing diffuse in contemporary society? What does it take to build and sustain alternatives in the face of dominating hegemonic forces?
- What are the implications of different approaches to defining alterity for the critical performativity of alternative organizations scholarship?
- Is “alternative organizing” even a politically useful concept today? What other concept(s) might be more pertinent?

Submitting your paper

Papers may be submitted electronically from **March 1st, 2025 until the deadline date of March 31st, 2025** to SAGETrack at: <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/organization>. Papers should be no more than 10,000 words, including references, and will be blind reviewed following the journal’s standard review process. Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines published in Organization and on the journal’s website:

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/organization#submission-guidelines>

Authors may send in their ideas and queries to the SI editors at:

AlternativeOrganizationSI@gmail.com

Online paper development workshop at the end of November 2024

An online paper development workshop will be held at the end of November 2024. Working short papers (max 3,000 words) should be submitted to through the email address AlternativeOrganizationSI@gmail.com by November 10th, 2024.

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