

Laura Dobusch, Leonhard Dobusch and Katharina Kreissl

Chapter 15

Searching for Transformative Potential: Comparing Conceptualizations of Open, Inclusive and Alternative Organizations

Abstract: In this chapter, we analyze scholarly approaches that explicitly imagine organizations as capable of ‘doing good’ and investigate which answers they give to the urgent need of stimulating socio-ecological transformations. We compare three streams of literature on open, inclusive and alternative organizations. We define the transformative potential of these approaches as related to ideas of (1) de-/postgrowth and other alternatives to profit-oriented organizing; and of (2) making room for historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups at the organizational power table. In our conclusion, we argue that the scale of transformative change needed asks scholars to transgress commonly separated camps of scholarship and, thus, to eclectically engage with all three organizational approaches to organize for socio-ecological transformations. At the same time, this requires challenging institutionalized underpinnings of how we organize scholarship as such.

Keywords: alternative, inclusion, inequalities, openness, socio-ecological transformations

Introduction

The debate about whether organizations are capable of ‘doing good’ or may be intrinsically opposed to contributing to more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable futures is nearly as old as management and organization studies (du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016). Answering this question becomes ever more pressing considering the role of organizations and in particular of companies (CDP, 2017) for the likely scenario of climate collapse (e.g., Steffen et al., 2018) and its interrelatedness with increasing inequalities within and between countries (e.g., Wilmoth et al., 2023).

Roughly speaking, the debate has been characterized by two strands of literature (du Gay, 2005; Holck, 2015): First, scholars wonder whether organizations relying on formalized and bureaucratic principles (e.g. rule-governed behaviour, separation of role from person, hierarchical authority) are *by design* opposed to humanistic and equity-related purposes (e.g., Ferguson, 1984; Türk, 1999). For one, the bureaucratization of living and working conditions is linked to a history of coercion, exploitation, control attempts and disciplining (e.g., Cooke, 2003; Rose, 1989; Knights and Willmott, 1990). For another, there is the assumption that formalized and bureaucratic elements

are only allegedly neutral in their effects but actually biased towards already privileged subject positions: in particular those perceived as able-bodied, male and white. Acker (1990, p. 149), for instance, very convincingly shows that the abstract design of work organizations needs and evokes the idea of the ‘disembodied worker’, which is closest to subject positions not associated with ‘visible’ corporeality and care responsibilities (e.g., able-bodied men relieved from care work by their partners, family networks and/or public institutions).

However, other scholars (e.g., Due Billing, 2005; Freeman, 1972–73) argue that it is precisely those formalized and bureaucratic elements that are considered inhuman and potentially oppressive that can contribute to creating more humane and equitable work environments: For instance, management by general rules and clear responsibilities is assumed to create predictability and transparency. Scholars hope that allocating positions and resources irrespective of the individual person, in orientation towards meritocratic standards, weakens informal networks of privileged organizational members or bias against minorities and members of historically disadvantaged groups (critical: Amis et al., 2020; Castilla and Benard, 2010). To put it bluntly, within this strand of literature, scholars interpret the core characteristics of formal organizations either as a curse or as a blessing when it comes to their transformative potential.

The second strand of literature is a more recent one, established in the mid 1990ies and related to the increasing ‘ethification’ of organizations in both practice and research (Parker, 1998). Here, the opportunities and limits of doing business in an ethical manner despite or because of a ‘corporate world’ perceived as increasingly globalized and complex is a main concern (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). Apart from focusing on the conjunction of ethics and actual business activities, scholars are also interested in whether and how organizations as a whole can become more ethical (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Hancock, 2008). Similar to the first strand of literature, the second also raises the fundamental question whether the basic principles of formalized and bureaucratic organizing (e.g., rule-based, functionality, efficiency, calculability) are in strong contrast to ethical considerations as such (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015; e.g., Hancock, 2008; Shamir, 2008). In particular, when they seem to be locked in with an economic growth imperative (Banerjee et al., 2021).

Whether considering the core features of formalized and bureaucratic organizing or the basic principles of doing business, the potential for organizations to contribute to socio-ecological transformations is vigorously questioned in both strands of literature. It is the nature of instrumental rationality and its connected modes of contemporary – capitalist-oriented – organizing that are depicted as fundamentally flawed. Although we agree that this line of argument enables a necessary vigilance against formalized and bureaucratic ways of organizing, we also think that it falls victim itself to an ‘over-abstraction’ of actual organizational life (du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016; see also Kamp and Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2004). It neglects the fact that there are multiple ways of using formalized and bureaucratic elements for actual organizing, that ethical values and behaviour are not only contested in organizations but in

all spheres of life and that ethics need to be *enacted* and are consequently always threatened by failure.

Furthermore, the scale of socio-ecological transformations needed in view of a looming climate collapse and other related environmental and social crises (see also George et al., 2016), requires organizations/forms of organizing attempting an ‘orchestration of collective cooperation’ (Greenwood and Miller, 2010, p. 78). However, some organizations/forms of organizing might be better suited to contribute to these socio-ecological transformations. Hence, painting a nuanced picture of conceptualizations of ‘good organizations’ is the subject of this article.

Organizing for ‘The Good’: Containing Transformative Potential?

In particular, we engage more deeply with those scholarly approaches that explicitly imagine organizations as capable of ‘being and doing good’ and investigate which organizational answers they give to address the urgent need of contributing to socio-ecological transformations. Scholarly work that deals with imagining ‘good organizations’ can be understood as an act of re-constructing and at the same time evoking social phenomena. However, whether theorizing can actually lead to ontological effects in the sense of stimulating change in practice – and this does not necessarily mean that this change is aligned with the premises of the respective theory (e.g., Ghoshal and Moran, 1996) – depends on a contingent bundle of material, social and knowledge-based relations and their ‘effective’ (re-)enactment (Butler, 2010; Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Ferraro et al., 2005). Therefore, scholars cannot determine but only (try to) contribute to ‘co-creat[ing] social change towards a desirable future by theorizing and legitimizing its occurrence on the fringes’ (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022, p. 328).

For this purpose, we compare three streams of literature that more or less address the ‘good organization’ as such: the open organization (e.g., Splitter et al., 2023), the inclusive organization (e.g., Ferdman and Deane, 2014; Mor Barak, 2014) and the alternative organization (e.g., Parker et al., 2014). Our main focus is to comprehend which characteristics of a ‘good organization’ are promoted in these streams of literature, probably leaving others disregarded, and whether they show transformative potential or rather contribute to reproducing the status quo. Before presenting our respective analysis, it is necessary to define what we mean by *transformative potential*.

The term of transformation has become a prominent buzzword in both scientific and political arenas (Krause, 2018). Therefore, like any buzzword it lacks a precise definition and shows – depending on the specific understanding – overlaps with other big concepts such as adaptation, resilience or transition (Feola, 2015). However, there is some common conceptual ground of the term transformation: First, it is asso-

ciated with the idea of ‘major, fundamental change, as opposed to minor, marginal, or incremental change’ (Feola, 2015, p. 377). Second, transformative change is imagined as a complex ‘non-linear, non-teleological process’ (Feola, 2015, p. 381) characterized by feedback loops, potential lock-in effects and path dependencies.

To us, this basic definition leaves the question unanswered when to consider a change as major, fundamental *enough* to be classified as transformative. Our response is to approach transformation in relation to the status quo of a specific context: in our case this is the field of conventional, market driven organizations, where organizing practices are tuned towards an extractive economic growth logic (Banerjee et al., 2021) and the privileging of dominant groups along the lines of intersecting inequalities (Acker, 2006; Amis et al., 2020). Hence, this conversely means that we see the most fundamental – transformative – potential of ‘organizing for the good’ when ideas of *de-/postgrowth* or other alternatives to profit-oriented organizing and/or making room for *historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups* at the organizational power table are brought forward. Centring both ecological forms of organizing/doing economy and the need for counteracting persistent intersecting inequalities is owed to the scientific insight (IPCC, 2022) that immediate collective, multi-level action is needed in order to avoid climate collapse and that growing social inequalities underlie and exacerbate climate change as well as connected injustices (e.g., Mikulewicz et al., 2023; Newell et al., 2021).

For our comparative analysis of the three streams of literature on open, inclusive and alternative organizations, we follow a frame analytical approach. This allows us to systematically reconstruct which kind of (transformative) change these approaches are – according to the respective academic literature – aspiring to, how this change is supposed to be achieved and which rationales they emphasize in order to legitimize their claims for change.

Frame Analysis of Approaches towards Open, Inclusive and Alternative Organizations

Inspired by Erving Goffman’s (1977) frame metaphor, frame analysis was developed in the theoretical context of social movement theory (Benford, 1997; Benford and Snow, 2000), Gender Studies (Verloo, 2005) and policy theory (Bacchi, 2009). Frame analysis follows the assumption that meaning is created by interactional, interpretative processes rather than being ‘naturally’ attached to phenomena in a pre-discursive way (Snow, 2004, p. 384). As an interpretation scheme, frames provide signification that is always connected to legitimation and embedded in power relations (Giddens, 1994). A frame, consequently, comprises an implicit or explicit diagnosis, a respective prescription (called ‘prognosis’ by Snow and Benford, 1988), and a call for action, also known as motivational framing. *Diagnostic framing* not only defines problems and causes but also identifies who and what to blame for them. *Prescriptive framing*, then, proposes

solutions to the diagnosed problem and recommends strategies, tactics and targets. Finally, *motivational framing* is a ‘call to arms for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action’ (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 199), offering a narrative to mobilize support and create motives for participating to outsiders.

In our analysis, we do not focus on social movements or policy frames, which are the original concern of frame analysis scholars. Rather, we want to investigate key conceptualizations of open, inclusive and alternative organizations and the transformative potential they contain. Similarly to policy, however, these approaches contain explicit and implicit normative claims towards the relevance, scale and implementation of the change needed and thereby bring forward elements of diagnosis, prescription and calls to action (see Table 1).

Table 1: Diagnostic, prescriptive and motivational frames of open, inclusive and alternative approaches and their transformative potential.

Concepts	Diagnosis: problem, causes and attribution	Prescription: proposed solution	Motivation: call to action	Transformative potential
Open organization	Organizations are non-transparent and closed, which prevents external actors from access to relevant (knowledge) resources and endangers legitimacy	New digital technologies enable sharing, collecting and processing additional (external) information	Opening up the organization is beneficial for performance because of increased efficiency and legitimacy	Focus on enabling access for new participants/contributors; potential for suspending economic growth logic (e.g., open-source software); however, often neglect of particularly marginalized groups and power structures
Inclusive organization	Organizations are potentially exclusionary, segregated and/or discriminatory settings; diversity (management) does not deliver on its promises	Comprehensive approach towards organizational change; however, focus on individual attitudes/behaviours and an inclusive leadership style	Inclusive organizing is not only ethically necessary but also beneficial for both the individual member and the organizational outcomes	Focus on inclusion of historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups while embracing economic growth logic; prescribes mostly incremental adjustments by leaders and HR

Table 1 (continued)

Concepts	Diagnosis: problem, causes and attribution	Prescription: proposed solution	Motivation: call to action	Transformative potential
Alternative organization	Organizations are hierarchical, oppressive and unsustainable regarding human and environmental needs and (re-) produce inequalities	With the democratization of work and decision-making via alternative organizing, new forms of social relationships can allow for more equality	Alternative organizing enhances autonomy, equality, democracy, solidarity and sustainability among organizational members and beyond	Focus on challenging profit-driven capitalism, embracing de-/post-growth and prefigurative elements like egalitarian structures; challenges lie in transferability and sustainability within context

Frame Analysis: Open Organization

The understanding of organizations as ‘open systems’ dates back to the end of the Second World War (e.g., Bertalanffy, 1969; Weick, 1969) and became commonplace in most prominent organization theoretical approaches (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). However, in all these accounts, ‘openness’ is considered an unavoidable conceptual building block for accurately describing and theorizing *any* form of organization. Conceptualizing openness as an organizational *ideal*, which can and should be achieved, has only emerged much more recently and has been fuelled by new digital communication technologies.

The *diagnosis* in these more recent works on open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006), open strategy (Whittington et al., 2011), or open government (Janssen et al., 2012) is that organizations may be too restrictive with regard to attracting and incorporating external resources (e.g., ideas, user communities) as well as with regard to granting access to relevant information, and even decision-making (for an overview across domains, see Splitter et al., (2023)). Consequently, openness is defined in demarcation to ‘traditional’, ‘exclusive’ or ‘closed’ approaches towards organizations. Chesbrough (2006, p. 1), for instance, defines open innovation as ‘the antithesis of the traditional vertical integration model’. Similarly, in their definition of ‘open strategy’ Whittington et al. (2011, p. 535) point to the fact that ‘strategy is traditionally exclusive’ and ‘normally regarded as secret’, whereas ‘[o]pen strategy challenges both these orthodoxies by widening inclusion and increasing transparency’. Janssen et al. (2012, p. 258) contrast governments ‘automatically’ closing when approached with open government,

‘in which the government acts as an open system and interacts with its environment’. The latter shows how even when referring to an open systems framework, openness is considered to be an achievement rather than a universal feature of – here: governmental – organizations.

Some approaches of organizational openness go beyond such negative definitions of openness by emphasizing the emergence of collective goods or commons due to specific ‘open’ organizational practices (e.g., Benkler, 2002). For instance, in the field of open source software, organizations use ‘open licensing’ to allow third parties access to and reuse of software source code. Von Hippel and von Krogh (2003, p. 209) describe open source software as ‘the best of both worlds’ where ‘new knowledge is created by private funding and then offered freely to all’.

Across fields, digital technologies are identified as the key drivers for both the boom in various shades of organizational openness and the *prescription* of how organizations are able to achieve and cope with the dissemination and differentiation of higher levels of organizational openness. Specifically, it is tools that enable sharing, collecting and processing additional information that allow for – but to some degree also require – more open forms of organizing (e.g., Turco, 2016). Again, open source software is the prime example, with authors such as Benkler (2002; p. 404) attributing the emergence of ‘peer production’ to ‘a pervasively networked environment’ where ‘communication and information exchange across space and time are much cheaper and more efficient than ever before.’ But also open crowdsourcing practices in innovation (e.g., Bauer and Gegenhuber, 2015; Füller et al., 2011) and strategy (e.g., Stieger et al., 2012; Dobusch and Kapeller, 2018) processes are regularly supported by specific digital tools (for an overview, see Majchrzak et al., 2021).

To a large degree representing the flipside of diagnostic frames, the *motivational* framing of openness attributes potential benefits to increasing openness with respect to previously excluded external and internal audiences, in processes ranging from innovation over strategy to the provision of goods and services. For example, a large body of literature points to the opportunity of tapping into potentially valuable but previously unreachable sources of knowledge by crowdsourcing approaches, which allow for more ‘distant search’ (Afuah and Tucci, 2012). In their review of the literature on open strategy, Hautz et al. (2017, p. 298) list potential benefits ‘such as greater creativity due to larger, more diverse pools of contributors (Stieger et al., 2012), increased commitment and joint sensemaking (Ketokivi and Castaner, 2004; Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Hutter et al., 2017), and favourable impression management (Gegenhuber and Dobusch, 2017; Yakis-Douglas et al., 2017)’. Others see chances for the co-production of key products and services such as in the cases of open source software (e.g., West, 2003), crowd science (e.g., Franzoni and Sauermaun, 2014; Beck et al., 2023) or ‘citizensourcing’ in the context of open government (e.g., Schmidhuber and Hilgers, 2017; critically: Kornberger et al., 2017).

When jointly looking at the diagnostic and motivational framing of the openness literature, a clearly ambivalent picture of its transformative potential emerges. On

the one hand, all approaches towards open organizing are about including formerly excluded groups, for instance, through their contribution of knowledge, skills or feedback. Further, in the case of open source software, a key aspect of the economic growth logic – the exclusive ownership and profitability of produced knowledge, goods and services – is suspended. On the other hand, this inclusion of formerly excluded audiences/contributors does neither necessarily focus on historically disadvantaged and/or particularly marginalized groups nor on opening up organizational decision-making and thus a restructuring of organizational power relations (see also Splitter et al., 2023).

In fact, the vast majority of the literature on open organizing revolves around a benefit imperative assuming that opening up will enhance an organization's capabilities to generate profit or achieve other social goals. Hence, forms of open organizing are positioned as 'purpose-neutral': ranging from an emphasis on profit maximization to aiming for socio-ecological transformations. Similarly, the prescriptive framing understands digital technologies as 'neutral tools' that can facilitate an organization's process of opening up. Moreover, insofar tackling societal grand challenges such as the climate crisis can only be achieved together with 'multiple and diverse stakeholders' (George et al., 2016, p. 1881), it may very well be the case that 'openness is an imperative in [. . .] times of crisis' (Chesbrough, 2020, p. 3).

Frame Analysis: Inclusive Organization

The ideal of an 'inclusive organization' can be traced back to the field of US-American disability policies as well as international education policies (UNESCO 1994) in the 1990s that responded to the call by disabled people and their allies to end practices of exclusion and segregation and guarantee their right to full access to all spheres of life. Referring to terms of 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education', policies emerged following the assumption that it is not the disabled individual that needs to change but rather the political and educational institutions themselves. In a similar vein, the term 'social exclusion' – and its positively associated counterpart 'social inclusion' – has become a central reference point of European social policies (Dobusch, 2014; Ferdman, 2014; Woodward and Kohli, 2001). Respective approaches understand exclusion and inclusion as multi-dimensionally caused and take both vertical and horizontal inequalities into account. Since the early 2000s, the notion of 'inclusion' has been used increasingly by HR practitioners in the US and travelled from there to other countries and academic discourses (Oswick and Noon, 2014).

In a nutshell, the notion of the 'inclusive organization' relates to the *diagnosis* that it is the organization itself, its potentially exclusionary, segregating and discriminatory settings that need to change in order to deal appropriately with the different needs and interests of all organizational members (Ferdman, 2014; Shore et al., 2018). This diagnostic framing that the whole organization is responsible for inclusion (and

exclusion) is supplemented by a second – and to some extent strategically motivated – assumption: scholars are positioning the concept of ‘organizational inclusion’ either in complementarity or in opposition to the term ‘diversity (management)’. Oswick and Noon (2014, p. 26) explain this turn towards inclusion with ‘the underlying recognition that diversity [management] is not delivering on its promises’. For instance, scholars describe inclusion as important for closing ‘the gap between the promise of diversity [management] and the current ability [. . .] to leverage the advantages of diversity’ (Nkomo, 2014, p. 584–585) or as necessary in order to ‘unleash the potential of workforce diversity’ (Pless and Maak, 2004, p. 130).

The diagnostic framing is based on a need for change articulated by practitioners and scholars, who all agree that the existing approaches towards creating more equitable workplaces are falling short. Following from that, the *prescription* about how to create an ‘inclusive organization’ oftentimes refers to the need for fundamental change. For instance, Nkomo (2014, p. 588) suggests that ‘inclusion requires second-order or radical change’ that is oriented towards organizations, which ‘from the outset had been developed and structured [. . .] for a group of people diverse in all the ways humanity can differ.’

The concrete proposals – *prescriptions* – on how to pursue the path towards an ‘inclusive organization’ are manifold, but have in common that they reject one-dimensional or one-time solutions. Many approaches take a comprehensive stance (Shore et al., 2018), which is based on the assumption that organizational inclusion can only be achieved if individual (e.g. attitudes, behaviour), group (e.g. norms, values, conflict handling) and organizational levels (e.g. structures, processes) are jointly addressed. Such change efforts are understood as process-based accomplishments, which depend on their actual, persistent enactment over a long period of time.

Although it is a key assumption that creating an ‘inclusive organization’ is a cross-cutting issue that affects all aspects of organizing, the respective levels receive different attention: At the organizational level scholars emphasize the need for establishing ‘broader fairness systems’ (Shore et al., 2011, p. 1277) such as inclusion-oriented HR policies (e.g., Pless and Maak, 2004; Boehm et al., 2014), conflict resolution processes (e.g., Roberson, 2006) or flexible working arrangements (e.g., Lirio et al., 2008; Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015).

However, the main focus is on how to achieve a ‘change in *interaction* patterns’ (Nishii 2013, p. 1755; emphasis by authors). For instance, the organizational members should actively engage with and learn from divergent perspectives (Nishii, 2013), treat each other with respect, and explicitly show appreciation of perceived differences (Daya, 2014; Pless and Maak, 2004). Thereby, the ‘full expression of people’s true self-concepts’ (Nishii and Rich, 2014, p. 337) is facilitated for every organizational member. Against this background, the inclusive leader/inclusive leadership is assumed to play an exceptional role not only for the encouragement of these individual attitudes and behaviours but also for creating the respective conditions in the first place (Nishii and Leroy, 2022). In summary, the analysis of prescriptive framing shows that it is – de-

spite its commitment to a comprehensive approach – first and foremost the individual (leader) that needs to change.

The *motivation* underlying the call for ‘inclusive organizations’ is the idea that by creating an inclusive environment *all* organizational members feel appreciated and develop a sense of belongingness. Thereby, the organizational members varying in terms of social identity group memberships, life situations and working styles are assumed to ‘work effectively together and [. . .] perform to their highest potential’ (Pless and Maak, 2004, p. 130). In particular, scholars identify benefits of inclusive organizing for organizational commitment and job performance (Cho and Mor Barak, 2008; Mor Barak, 2000), team creativity (Li et al., 2015) or constructive conflict management (Nishii, 2013). Basically, the motivational framing illustrates that inclusion efforts will be beneficial for organizational outcomes as well as for both minority and majority organizational members.

Looking in isolation at the diagnostic framing, the literature on inclusive organizations does indeed emphasize the need for fundamental change thereby focusing on the adaptation of organizations towards the needs and interests of historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups. However, when zooming in on the prescriptive framing we see a mismatch between those claims of major change and the actual suggestions of how this kind of change can be achieved: it is mostly incremental measures performed either by ‘inclusive leaders’ or through HR policies that are emphasized. What further diminishes the transformative potential of the inclusive organization literature is its motivational framing: in its essence it is about affirming a business case for making organizations more inclusive and thus does not question – in contrast, rather encourages – the dominance of an economic growth logic. Hence, while this stream of literature claims to look out for historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups, the dominant conceptualizations of inclusion are inherently conditional. Meaning that the person/groups assumed to ‘be worthy of inclusion’ need to appear as capable of ‘adding something deemed to be of value’ (Tyler, 2019, p. 63), which is first and foremost assessed according to its compatibility with an organization’s striving for profit maximization.

Frame Analysis: Alternative Organization

The stream of literature on alternative organizations exhibits a multitude of theoretical and empirical approaches to organizational practices outside of corporate organizing and is, in itself, not a coherent or homogeneous enterprise. Reedy and Learmonth (2009, p. 244) trace back the term ‘alternative organization’ to sociologists in the 1960s, referring to common ground with radically alternative culture and politics from this decade. Since Freeman’s ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (1972–73), scholars and political activists have debated how to reach democratic and egalitarian organizations without reproducing power asymmetries. It is, however, important to note that ‘alternative’ is

a broad and fluid term not only regarding its meaning and content, but also ‘in the sense that yesterday’s alternative can easily become today’s conventional practice’ (Cheney, 2014).

One common denominator in the *diagnosis*, however, is a certain amount of criticism towards modern capitalist structures and corresponding ways of organizing that are considered unjust, not humane and leading to ecological disaster. Relating to Max Weber’s (1978) theory of social closure, Robert Michels’ (1915) ‘iron law of oligarchy’ or labour process theory (Knights and Willmott, 1990), scholars observe that the powerful within organizations draw boundaries in order to preserve and monopolize their position and resources, resulting in a constant reproduction of inequalities. This is also what makes innovation difficult (Kokkinidis, 2015): organizations ‘often just keep on doing whatever it is that they do, like zombies that move but have no consciousness or heart’ (Parker et al., 2014, p. 34). Also, the principle of infinite growth gained by competitive relations, shareholder politics, wealth concentration and the exploitation of planetary resources, is identified as one of the main problems within capitalist corporate organizing, especially when it comes to the climate crisis and social inequalities (Parker, 2017; Phillipps and Jeanes, 2018). In short, conventional organizations are diagnosed as hierarchical and oppressive arrangements that are resistant to (social) innovation, unsustainable regarding human and non-human needs, and (re-)producers of inequalities (see also Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

In contrast, alternative organizations are understood first and foremost ‘in opposition to the familiar, tradition, mainstream, predominant, or hegemonic institutional arrangements’ (Cheney, 2014). The term ‘alternative’ hints at two different strands of rethinking organizations: on an analytical level, it suggests organizational practice and theory that open ideas of thinking apart from conventional organizing in a novel, experimental and creative way. Cheney (2014), for example, identifies a set of attitudes that accompanies the discourse of ‘alternative’ organizing: not taking assumptions for granted, fostering imagination regarding the possible or impossible, promoting experimentation and social entrepreneurialism as a collective, value-based effort. On a normative level, scholars and activists promote principles of alternative organizing that include individual autonomy, equality/equity, collective duties, participation and democracy as well as responsibility to resources, people and the environment (in short: the future). Reedy and Learmonth (2009, p. 244) describe alternative organizations as having different purposes that include ‘conviviality, mutual support, self-sufficiency, environmental sustainability, individual autonomy, various forms of self-expression or even the transformation of society at large.’

The *prescriptive framing*, i.e., the proposed solutions and strategies for the diagnosed problem, mainly revolves around the notion of prefiguration (Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Prefiguration, in short, is an attempt to ‘model the desired future society in the movement’s own practice’ (Hammond, 2015, p. 288) by embodying ‘those forms of social relations, decision making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goals’ (Boggs, 1977, p. 100) into practice. Thereby, prefiguration also suggests the inseparable

arability of means and ends within organizing. Consequently, in order to build an alternative organization, organizational structures of membership, decision-making, democratic processes and organizational goals must be congruent, so that ‘the very process of organizing in a particular way becomes its own reward, as well as a process by which other goals might be achieved’ (Parker et al., 2014, p. 35). Many researchers have spent a considerable amount of time engaged with the initiatives, groups or movements that empirically advocate and enact anti-capitalistic prefigurative forms of organizing, often as long-period activists and community members (e.g., Eleftheriadis, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Siltanen et al., 2015).

The *motivation* of the alternative organization discourse is mainly based on explicit normative reasoning, with the claim that there are no inherent necessities associated with persisting inequalities and that another societal order – more egalitarian, democratic, community-based and sustainable – is not only possible, but imperative (e.g., Parker et al., 2014). With climate change and other ecological crises gaining more significance in the debate, scholars (Ergene et al., 2021; Nyberg and Wright, 2020) emphasize the sheer necessity of fundamental alternatives to market driven organizing and to mere mitigation efforts (such as recycling) that are not ultimately based on the ‘industrialized production and consumption towards the impossible goal of unlimited economic growth’ (Ergene et al., 2021, p. 1323). Hence, alternative organizing centring prefiguration, as Parker et al. (2014, p. 35) put it, is supposed to ‘bring into being new forms of social relationships’ that balance individual freedom with collective agreement and enable responsibility to the future.

The transformative potential of alternative organizations is intrinsic to its conceptual framework. This involves organizing in ways that challenge and surpass profit-based orientation of capitalism, incorporating perspectives of de- and post-growth. It also encompasses the prefigurative aspect of envisioning the desired future in current organizational practices such as, e.g., democratic modes of decision-making, establishing egalitarian structures via flat hierarchies and thereby empowering historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized voices (critical: Bendl et al., 2022). Alternative organizations serve as an experimental platform for discovering ways for desirable futures but also for how to address inequalities and power dynamics within these alternative contexts. Both aspects hold potential for genuine change through experimental, unconventional forms of organizing. The difficulty lies in making these changes transferable and sustainable. The experience gained from these processes needs to be shared and built upon, while being critically mindful of the relationship between the continual establishment of alternative practices to their original objectives. Creating environments conducive to prefigurative organizing is heavily contingent on contextual factors. Consequently, the path to achieving the aforementioned goals remains somewhat undefined.

Discussion and Outlook

Convinced that organizations play a key role in either stalling or promoting socio-ecological transformations, we have analyzed streams of literature that explicitly approach the unit of the organization as capable of ‘doing good’, as something more than simply a tool to create shareholder value or to provide products and services. Thereby we respond to the call by Ergene and Calás (2023), who make a plea for the imagination of ‘viable possibilities for creating liveable ecologies’ by looking into the scholarly work already engaging with desirable visions of organizational life.

In particular, we followed an analysis of core texts of the literature on open, inclusive and alternative organizations to assess their transformative potential. We defined transformative potential in a twofold way: On the one hand, we focused on whether these bodies of literature would include ideas of de-/post-growth or other alternatives to profit-oriented forms of doing business and thus say goodbye to the imperative of an economic growth logic; on the other hand, we zoomed in on whether conceptualizations of ‘good organizations’ paid attention to making room for historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups at the organizational power table.

When comparatively looking at the three different streams of literature, it is not surprising that conceptualizations of alternative organizations seem to be the most in line with the outlined transformative potential. However, this high alignment with alternative forms of doing business and enacting relationships comes at the cost of ‘exceptionalism’: ‘prefigurative communities and organizations are commonly seen as laboratories that experiment with alternative ways of organizing, alternative practices and new forms of social relations in the economy’ (Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Hence, concrete examples of alternative organizations do either represent relatively isolated entities such as ecovillages or degrowth communities or outliers embedded in established branches such as food cooperatives whose viability is maintained (also) through co-existence with mainstream food suppliers. This is not an argument against (the imagination of) alternative organizations per se, but rather the attempt to put the associated transformative potential into perspective.

In contrast to literature on alternative organizations, conceptualizations of inclusive organizations are not positioned outside a market-based economy. In fact, becoming more inclusive is depicted as seamlessly in line with/enhancing an organization’s business case and thus not questioning the economic growth logic at all. Furthermore, while literature on inclusive organizations claims to centre interests and needs of historically disadvantaged and particularly marginalized groups, it falls short of prescriptive policies and measures reflecting these major change ideals.

Interestingly, while the literature on open organizations might have seemed to bear the least transformative potential – considering its original ties to (profitable) innovation – our analysis has revealed that conceptualizations of open organizations are neither intrinsically opposed to nor naturally support transformative goals. In

fact, due to their emphasis on digitally supported modes of information sharing, content contribution and exchange possibilities, conceptualizations of open organizations can but do not have to unfold a transformative potential towards socio-ecological justice.

In view of the scale of transformative change needed to deal with the multiple and interlinked crises we are currently facing, we plead for highly eclectic engagement with scholarly work already imagining different ways of organizational life. For instance, the know-how and experiences of openness scholarship on the digitally supported participation of various stakeholders in strategy-making processes might be very valuable for thinking about alternative and inclusive forms of organizing. At the same time, literature on inclusive organizations can shed light on the neglected power asymmetries and perpetuated forms of exclusion within organizational settings labelled as alternative or open. Finally, scholarship on alternative organizations can enable testing and transgressing the (growth-related) boundaries of 'good organizing' embedded in conceptualizations of open and inclusive organizations.

Hence, assisting socio-ecological transformations on a global scale implies for us as scholars also the transgression of commonly separated camps of scholarship. To some degree, this requires challenging highly institutionalized underpinnings of how we organize scholarship, as well. In other words, the dominant journal and reviewing system that rewards cliquish tendencies among competing – rather than cooperating – camps of scholarship with publishing and thus career opportunities deserves scrutiny with respect to lack of openness and inclusivity, calling for alternative ways of organizing academia.

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