

Course information

Organisation theory for a changing world

7,5 ECTS

Autumn 2021

This class may be of interest to PhD students researching organisations or organisational phenomena. It might also be of interest for students who want to use organisation theory as a lens to look at their research topic, even if it does not include organisations *per se*. The class is offered by the sociology discipline at Mid Sweden University with professor Roine Johansson and associate professor Jörgen Sparf as coordinators and main instructors. Both of us are researching organisations in the research field of crisis and disaster studies, where we find many interesting organisational issues yet to be explored.

Crises and disasters of any magnitude usually involve a deviation from everyday life—for people and organisations. They are often volatile events; they interrupt business operations, create uncertainty, and are more or less chaotic. Organisations dealing with such events, or the consequences, face challenges and uncertainties of many sorts—before, during and after the acute event. The way the organisations go about dealing with these challenges and uncertainties become theoretically interesting. In condensed form, here we have situations that represent many of the general uncertainties and challenges currently faced by organisations worldwide. A theoretical understanding of crises and disasters can, thus, provide general knowledge organising and organisation for more significant challenges in the world such as climate change and environmental issues.

However, while we use our empirical field of study as a departing point, this class is not specifically about crises and disasters. In the remainder of this document, you will first find a detailed description of the content and themes of the class. After that, there is a draft schedule and some practical information. At the end of the document, you can find information on how to sign up for the class and contact details.

Description

Organisation and organising are sometimes described theoretically as a way to manage uncertainty. By establishing rules and regulations, structures and hierarchies, such theories assume that social goals can be reached effectively and that businesses can be controlled and function efficiently. Much of the early organisational theory concerned such formal and regulatory aspects. Since then, the body of organisation theory has grown incredibly large and branched virtually incomprehensibly. One significant stream of theories concerns themselves with the rapidly changing conditions in organisational environments and the uncertainty that characterises much of organisational life today. In this class, we will discuss this specific line of theories.

While the family of theories is not particularly coherent, they share a dynamic view of organisational phenomena. They also share an interest in incorporating emergence, flows, social relations and time and space components. Because of this, we will "go beyond" the formal organisation in this class. We will discuss mainly two things: (i) how the conditions for organisation and organising are affected by uncertainty and change, and (ii) recent organisation theory treating how and why organising occur within these conditions.

Class structure

The class is structured with an introduction and four themes. The theme I and II presents two broad perspectives on organising: as *process* and as *relations*. Theme III and IV concern more specific theories dealing with organisational *form* and its extension in *time and space*.

Introduction

In the introductory meeting, we will discuss mainly two areas. The first is how we can understand the meaning of *uncertainty and change as conditions for organisation and organising*. We will present and problematise theories, concepts, and ongoing research in the field. We will also highlight the conditions for organisation and organising in complex and complicated situations and how organisation theory can contribute to understanding these. The second discussion area regards the *development of organisation theory in a more general sense*. We will present some of the main streams of theory and essential areas of development in recent years. These two areas will serve as a departure point for the rest of the class, allowing us to position the themes of the class and reflect on their contribution to the knowledge creation in organisation theory.

Theme I: Process theory of organisation

Since ancient times, process thinking has been around, thus influencing most scientific disciplines in one way or another. In organisation studies, the influence has been the strongest in the last two decades. Organisation is in this line of thinking a central aspect of societal change—organisation is a process of doing, re-doing, and un-doing. Instead of considering fixed structures and units, this stream of theorising views any meaningful 'whole' as organisation. These 'wholes', or entities, can be virtually anything from a Twitter community, an interest group, an entrepreneur with an idea, a think-tank, a fashion show, the spread of a particular technology, or any formal organisation. Process-based theory aims to apply to a world on the move in which communities and connectivity are more important than size, flows more important than stability, and time more important than space.

Theme II: Organisation and networks

Network perspectives emphasise relationships rather than entities to explain and interpret organisational phenomena. In this perspective, organisations are not something that "contains" relationships or an arena in which relationships are played out. Organisations are a relational fabric in themselves; organisations "are relationships" rather than "have relationships". The relationship between organisation and network can be seen from several different perspectives. (1) Organisation and networks can be considered two different forms of social order, both of which are mutually exclusive. (2) Organisations can be considered as networks, thus studying intra-organisational relations. (3) Organisations can be considered nodes, studying inter-organisational networks. (4) Networks can be considered as a form of organisation, thus talking about network organisations.

Theme III: Partial organisation

In the 1990s, there was a general observation that more and more sectors of society became organised, i.e. increasingly characterised by formal organisations and that society as a whole was developing into a society of organisations. More recently, this discussion argues that large swaths of the society are not fully organised but rather semi-organised. A decade ago, this insight evolved into a theory of partial organisation. Many phenomena in social life are partly organised without taking place within the framework of a formal organisation. One example is large workplaces, such as construction sites, where a variety of organisations come together but where the workplace as a whole is not an organisation.

Theme IV: Temporary organisation

Continuity and permanence are usually considered fundamental features of organisations in organisation theory. These features are independent of the organisation's members: Individuals come and go, but the organisation persists and survives its members. However, there are forms of organisation that do not live up to the notion of permanence. These forms of organisation are instead temporary, i.e., temporally delimited. Such organisations have been around for a very long time, for example, in military operations. More recently, however, the temporary organisation has increased significantly, both in terms of empirical occurrence and interest from the research community. By far, the most high-profile form of organisation in this context is the project organisation: it is formally organised but only exists for a specified time. Another form of temporary organisation is rescue operations in connection with, for example, large fires. Such efforts are also limited in time but without a specified timeframe known in advance. It is time and its demarcation that is the focus of this line of research.

Schedule and assignments

The class runs from 12 October to 3 December 2021, with five meetings plus exam seminars. Participation in all seminars is mandatory.

Please note that the schedule below is tentative and may be subject to change until the class starts. The hours might be adjusted to fit different time zones if necessary.

The class runs online on Zoom. If the COVID-19 situation allows for it, we might organise physical meetings as well. If any of the participants cannot attend a physical meeting, we will arrange for a hybrid format allowing everyone to participate. Any changes to the schedule will be decided in dialogue with the participants.

There is no literature listed in the course plan for the introduction. A separate list will instead be published after the introduction. The four seminars that follow are based on the literature listed per theme in the course plan. There will be a written assignment for each seminar based on the literature. The assignment should be submitted before the seminar. The seminars will include a lecture followed by a discussion based on the submitted assignments. If a participant neglects to submit the assignment before the seminar, they will have to do an extra assignment even if they attend the related seminar.

Seminars

Date	Preliminary hours (CET)	Title	Lecturer
October 12	13.15–16.00	<i>Introduction</i>	Roine Johansson, Jörgen Sparf, Olof Oscarsson, Mid Sweden University
October 19	10.15–15.00	<i>Theme II: Organisation and networks</i>	Jörgen Sparf, Evangelia Petridou, Mid Sweden University
October 26	10.15–15.00	<i>Theme III: Partial organisation</i>	Nils Brunsson, Uppsala University
November 2	10.15–15.00	<i>Theme I: Process theory of organisation</i>	Tor Hernes, Copenhagen Business School
November 9	10.15–15.00	<i>Theme IV: Temporary organisation</i>	Roine Johansson, Mid Sweden University
November 29 – December 3	Days and hours TBA	<i>Exam seminars</i>	TBA

Registration and contact

You may register for the class no later than **15 September 2021**. Send your registration by email to Dr Jörgen Sparf, at jorgen.sparf@miun.se. Please include your name and university and your academic discipline.