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A Modus Vivendi between Movement and Materiality: Henri Bergson and the Matter of Organization

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The philosophy of Henri Bergson has inspired several scholars in organization studies for a while (Calori, 2002; Khandker, 2017; Linstead, 2002, 2014; Mutch, 2016) as it brings an interesting approach for considering organization as a making process of actors, roles, technologies (etc.) and their relations. The philosophy of Henri Bergson has thus offered an interesting perspective to study different topics such as innovation (O'Shea, 2002), knowledge (Wood, 2002), entrepreneurship (Hjorth, 2013), organizational culture (Linstead & Mullarkey, 2003), time (Chia, 2002) or leadership (Painter-Morland & Deslande, 2014), among others.

The main purpose of Henri Bergson's philosophy is to consider life as an indivisible movement in which things are *images*¹ built from our perceptions of the world. He suggested a philosophy based on the notion of movement as an alternative to the philosophy of ideas. The philosophy of ideas – which is the common way of thinking – is based on the assumption that the world is made of things that have a specific form. For the philosophy of ideas, the forms are the essence of reality, while their becoming is only a sign of their degradation (Bergson, 1907/2009, p. 317). In contrast, the philosophy of movement stands for another view about reality. For Henri Bergson, the world is not made by things with inherent and given properties, but rather it is an indivisible movement in which nothing is predefined. However, this indivisible movement is rarely experienced and our only way to access the reality is to experience the indivisible movement as a set of *images*. Consequently, we do not know and will never know if these *images* are the very essence of reality or not, and the only thing we can do is to deal with them for what they are. Consequently, *images* are both objective and subjective, given to us through our perception of them (Bergson, 1896/2010). *Images* have an objective existence because we can only experience them as exterior to us. As soon as we think or try to

represent the indivisible movement, we do nothing but define it as objective through the very definition of external *images*. But at the same time, *images* have a subjective existence, because they are always experienced through our perceptions. They are embedded into our sensible experience of the world. Through the notion of *images*, Bergson (1896/2010, p. 21) has tried to bypass the ageless debate between realism and idealism; as for the philosopher the question of the very existence of things is an insoluble problem leading to a sterile debate. For Bergson (1911/2011), the reality is an indivisible movement, but we can only access this reality by materializing this movement into *images*. A large part of Bergson's philosophy is about this tension between the indivisible movement of life and the materialization of the world.

The tension between movement and materiality

More precisely, this tension is mainly developed based on the notions of *durée* and materiality; which represent the two opposite extremes of a same dynamic between the sensible experience of movement (*durée*) and the intelligible reality (materiality). Bergson (1889/2013) developed the notion of *durée* in his early works as a way to insist on the fact that reality is fundamentally indivisible and always in a state of progression without any predefined stage and change (Hussenot, 2021). The *durée* is the sensible experience of the world, when there is no beginning and no end, and when the past and the present are not different events but a unique immanent movement in which the past is versed into the present. This sensible experience (called *pure durée*²) is rarely lived in itself as people need to operate separation and division to make the world tangible.

² Pure *durée* is reached when people experience the invisible movement of life, that is an experience in which things, space and time are vanished: 'Pure *durée* is the form taken by the succession of our states of consciousness when our self allows itself to live, when it refrains from establishing a separation between the present state and the previous states' (Bergson, 1889/2013, pp. 74–75).

¹ With the notion of *images*, Bergson (1896/2010, p. 21) has tried to avoid the trap of both realism and idealism. The notion of *image* is thus a way to surpass the question about the existence of things.

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The materiality is thus everything made to build an intelligible reality. This is why *durée* and materiality are constantly in tension. While *durée* means that life is an indivisible and ungraspable moment, materiality comprises the forms emerging from life. In other words, materiality is the individuation process in which forms appear. The materialization of the world is thus inevitable; it is a necessary process enabling people to experience and act.

More precisely, materiality is what offers people the ability to make the world concrete; while this concreteness is nothing but misleading divisions, separations and oppositions. Materiality has thus a tricky status here as there is nothing tangible in the world but materiality; at the same time, materiality has no inherent properties (Husenot, 2021). They are just *images* individually and collectively defined, made out of the movement and only existing in a state of becoming. Here again, the apparent stability of the form of the *images* are just tricks made by the intelligence to make the activity possible:

Or rather there is no form, since the form is immobile while the reality is movement. What is real is the continual change of form: if the form is only an instantaneous one taken on a transition. Thus, here again, our perception makes its best to solidify into discontinuous images the fluid continuity of the reality. (Bergson, 1907/2009, p. 302)

As Henri Bergson said, the forms do not exist. Consequently, the recurrence and the change of these forms are merely an illusion created by the intelligence; as there is no recurrence or change, but only an unstoppable progression of the movement of life.

The notion of materiality is thus different from the way we are used to mobilize it in organization theories. By opposing *durée* and materiality, the social has to be understood as part of the materialization process. In such a view, materiality and social are not imbricated or intertwined as suggested by many scholars in organization studies but are a same process of materialization of the indivisible movement of life. The materialization process is thus the very characterization of social life. All of what defines the social (rules, hierarchy, agency, etc.) are only forms emerging from this materialization. For example, the debate about sociomateriality³ (Kautz & Jensen, 2013) does not make any sense from a Bergsonian's perspective as the social is nothing but material. In other words,

³ One of the most famous examples of this debate in organization studies can be found between the scholars of the socio-materiality claiming the overlap between social and material such as Leonardi and Barley (2008) and those of the sociomateriality (without hyphen), claiming the entwinement of social and material, such as Orlikowski and Scott (2008). However, as actors define and make a separation between material and social, people need this separation to make their reality tangible. So, the notion of materiality can be confusing especially in a context where this notion has been quite central for a while in the debate in organization studies.

materialization is the very definition of social life, as a collective definition of *images* enabling people to act and live together.

The world, the body and the action

To sum up, Henri Bergson's philosophy is based on the core idea that the reality is indivisible and constantly progressing; while human intelligence is only about making isolated things (called *images* or forms) out of this movement in order to make action possible. The need to act here is the main reason why there is tension between the movement and the materiality. For Bergson, all the things we define are only made for action. Concepts, theories, tools, categories and so on are oriented toward action. Consequently, there is no abstract or theoretical things but only practical ones as anything is made for a practical reason and the way we define things only depends on what actors want to do. Action is thus central in his philosophy as everything emerges from action and for action. As Bergson (2009, p. 249) said: 'there are no things, there are only actions'. Materiality finds its very purpose in the fact that it is the only way for people to act. In this, action consists in the materialization of the world – as a creation of forms that are artificially linked together – to make other actions possible.

In addition, the constant materialization of the world has another core purpose: to define our body. For Bergson (2010), we define the world not only to act, but to define our body as well. More precisely, everything is made to define the body and at the same time, the body is the canvas from which everything else can be defined. The body is what is used to define the world, that is a form to define other forms, while the definition of these other forms participates in the definition of the body. In such, body and activity are two related notions as there is no action without the definition of the body (as a primary form enabling people to define a tangible world), while the body is defined through the action. The constant co-definition of the body and the action explains how the reality is materialized. But, it also explains the ongoing movement of life as the action and the body are intertwined and constantly evolving:

Bergson wants to show that our body is in contact with the real matter of the universe and yet radically deforms it for reasons that are necessary and somehow a priori, even if they are objective and vital. This is the aim of the theory of 'pure perception' and the notion of image that is used in it. In contact with materiality (the images are objective, outside, neither in the brain nor in the mind), our body adapts them to its action [...]. (Worms, 2009, pp. 11–12 in Bergson, 2009)

The body thus plays a key role in the definition of reality, as we define things and position them in time and space thanks to the body and for the very purpose of the definition of the body. The body is thus a key instrument in the definition of *images*.

Organization as a modus vivendi between movement and materiality

To date, in Bergson's philosophy, movement is the very essence of life, while materiality involves the *images* that define reality. Based on these concepts, Bergson (2009) opposed the indivisible movement of life and our tendency to transform this movement into objective and external entities, stages, time and space. All of these things defined by intelligence are only oriented toward the action. Everything is thus built for a practical purpose. Movement and materiality are thus not opposed to each other, but rather they are engaged in a dance in which each partner needs the other. Thus, between movement and materiality, there is a *modus vivendi* and this is exactly where the organization lies. So organization is where life and materiality meet to offer an in-between, a point of equilibrium in such a tension:

In reality, life is a movement, materiality is the inverse movement, and each of these two movements is simple, the matter forming a world is an undivided flow, undivided is also the life that passes through it by shaping living beings. Of these two currents, the latter counteracts the former; but the former nevertheless obtains something from the second. From them comes a *modus vivendi*, which is precisely the organization. (Bergson, 1907/2009, p. 250)

With this definition of organization, Henri Bergson seemed to stick with the very roots of the notion of organization: the making of *órganon*, that is a Greek word meaning instruments or tools. In this, organization is the ongoing process of tools and instruments enabling actors to define and comprehend their reality in order to act. In other words, organization is what defines all the tools and instruments making the activity possible. However, the making of *órganon* does not concern solely the technologies or the rules, but any *image* helping to define the bodies and the world as well. Following this interpretation, Henri Bergson suggested a view in which organization is the making process of our body, the others, the humans, the non-humans and the relations. In this, organization defines the confines and the constituents of the actionable reality. Moreover, as organization is in-between movement and materiality, it is both constantly evolving and stable enough to make the activity possible.

This definition of organization is here really close to the definition suggested by organization scholars such as Chia (1999) – as he has suggested to define organization as an ongoing aggregative world-making activity – or Tsoukas and Chia (2002) as they have defined organization as both a 'given structure (i.e., a set of established generic cognitive categories) and an emerging pattern (i.e., the constant adaptation of those categories to local circumstances)' (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 573). The definition suggested by Bergson (2009) also resonates with one of the current

debates in organization studies about the view based on the ontology of becoming – privileging movement – and the ontology of substance – privileging materiality (Chia, 2003). To date, this debate that is mainly raised by the scholars of the process organization community opposes these two views to insist on the development of our understanding of organization as an open phenomenon, which is always in a state of becoming. No doubt that Henri Bergson would adopt an ontology of becoming, but it would not go too far in this view as things have an existence for him (as center of action, notably). The notion of organization as suggested by Bergson (2009) forces us to rethink this dualism as the organization is neither pure movement nor pure materiality, but rather a recurrent and evolving phenomenon.

Studying organization with Henri Bergson's philosophy

Henri Bergson offers an interesting but quite disturbing view about organization, notably for those who consider organization as a taken for granted entity that should be dismantled and studied by scholars. This disturbance might come from the fact that the notion of organization here doesn't serve an economic or managerial purpose, but a philosophical one about life. Through the notion of organization, Henri Bergson tried to explain how things can have an external existence – as we experience them in this way – and at the same time, how life can only be an indivisible movement. As explained above, organization has thus two purposes: defining the images that constitute the world and above all the body and defining the actuality and the potentiality of the activity. It means that an image is merely its activities; while the activities are made possible thanks to these images defining the scope of action. Consequently, central dimensions of the activity, such as time, space and order emerge and are maintained in the *modus vivendi* between movement and materiality.

The matter of time and space

The matter of time and space have been mainly developed in *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, the first book of Bergson (2013). While he introduced the notion of *durée*, he had to develop the consequences of such a concept in terms of time and space. The passage from the *durée* to the materiality is the very emergence of spatialized things, that is separated things that can be labeled. In this passage, events are defined, isolated and succeed one to the other; while the objects are scattered. Even time is treated the same way. Time is here defined as an external dimension. By doing so, what we call time (as the succession of events on a given timeline) is nothing but

space. The materiality leads to the 'spacialization' of both time and space. Consequently, time is here just the ghost of space (Bergson, 1889/2013); that is an environment in which one can distinguish and count the things. Dealing with time and space from Henri Bergson's philosophy is thus dealing with the same thing. But once again, what we experience is an in-betweenness, partly in the *durée* and partly in the materiality. This in-betweenness is the following dynamic: the sensible experience we live is unique and constitutes a movement in which everything is co-defined and intertwined with everything else; but at the same time, this sensible experience is transformed into intelligible facts separated and distributed in two homogeneous environments: the time and the space.

So, the very challenge is to conceptualize time and space from this in-betweenness. This is exactly why Bergson suggested putting time first. Rather than dealing with time as space, he suggested dealing with space as time. In such a view, the ongoing flow of experiences is constantly defined and divided to form a temporality that is experienced by actors. As the activity constantly evolves, the temporality does as well. Conversely, any evolution in the temporality changes the actuality and the potentiality of the activity (Hussenot et al., 2020). This is why pure materiality is a mere illusion, as much as the pure movement. This ongoing evolution (called progression in Henri Bergson's vocabulary) is an immanent process in which the things are both separated for the sake of action and intertwined as an indivisible movement. For example, a past event is considered both as an external event which already happened and an internal one enacted by actors to explain, define, justify, and make a decision about a current situation. A past event is thus a stable thing and is constantly redefined through its enactment. For instance, the way we enact the second world war is never the same; as the accounts, the explanations, the actors, and so on evolve over time, but at the same time, it is an *image* that is stable enough to make various activities possible, such as political and diplomatic ones.

The matter of order and disorder

In Bergson's philosophy, the matter of order and disorder is related to the materialization process as well. As the materialization is a way to make the reality intelligible, any materiality is an ordering process; that is a way to define and assemble *images*. As this materialization is the only tangible reality we can experience, there is only order. What we call disorder is only the experience of an unexpected order (Bergson, 1907/2009). Here again, the ordering is not given, but always evolving as the *images* and their assemblage always evolve for the sake of the activities. More precisely, in the *durée*, the matter of order and disorder are irrelevant as there is no distinguishable thing, no

assemblage, and no positioning in space and time. Conversely, in the pure materiality, the order is perfect as the images are well defined, distinguished and well assembled. However, as we always are in-between, the ordering is always in a state of becoming. The possibility of any stable order is thus a key question for organization studies and the *theory of knowledge* at large: 'The fundamental problem of the theory of knowledge is, in fact, to know how science is possible, that is to say, in short, why there is order; and not disorder; in things' (Bergson, 1907/2009, p. 232). In other words, Henri Bergson's philosophy can be considered as a call for inverting the main issue about organization. In such a view, the issue is not about the change of a given organization over time, but the very continuity, stability and ordering; that is the same in a world that does not remain the same (Bergson, 1889/2013).

The notion of order is another opportunity to understand how things are defined and isolated from the *durée*. If the *durée* is the continuous progress of past into the present and the future, the ordering is the act of splitting the *durée* into different past, present and future events to order them on a timeline. For example, forecasting is really about defining events and creating order between them. Any forecast can only be the result of the materialization and ordering of the *durée* in various past, present and future events. To foresee is thus defining future events based on the past and the present ones that are expected to follow them in a certain order 'to foresee is to project in the future what has been perceived in the past, or to represent a new assembly of elements, in another order, of elements already perceived' (Bergson, 1907/2009, p. 6). To sum up, the order is always contingent and depends on what it is experienced, that is the *images* and the activities. Here again, the order is merely another trick of the intelligence to make the activity possible. By ordering things in time and space, it enables actors to act. But, ironically, the activity is the very reason why the order is constantly called into question, as for the sake of action, one needs to renew this order, while any action leads to new disorder as any action changes the *images* that define the world. As underpinned by Deleuze (1968, p. 80) – who was deeply influenced by Bergson's philosophy – what we experience is a 'chaosmos', that is an encounter between the cosmos (order) and the chaos. Following this, the matter of organization can be comprehended as a manifestation of this 'chaosmos'.

The laugh as a way to study organization

Henri Bergson provided a lot of concepts that might help scholars to think and study the matter of organization. *Durée*, movement, *images*, materiality (etc.) participate in the development of a view in which the organization is understood as an immanent world making process, both constantly evolving and resisting and both enabling and constraining activity. But

how to put this view into practice? Of course, it is impossible to provide an ultimate answer to this question as Henri Bergson did not conduct empirical studies. However, in *Le Rire*, a book dedicated to the role of the laugh in society, Bergson (1900/2013) explained how the laugh reveals a lot about human and non-human interactions. A core statement is that laughter happens when there is a lack of flexibility and adaptability in the flow of activities. According to Bergson (1900/2013), the laugh is the sign of a rigidity, and a call from the society for more flexibility. In other words, the laugh expresses the inflexibility of the body, the character or the spirit that the society would like to eliminate in order to introduce more flexibility and sociability. As claimed by Bergson (1900/2013), inflexibility is thus funny, but laughter is its punishment by society.

Laughing tells us a lot about the tension between movement and materiality, because we laugh when the materiality is inadequate or too strong. The laugh is thus a sign that the *modus vivendi* between *durée* and materiality is not achieved anymore. More precisely, the laugh is this breaking in the social interaction, showing that a progression is occurring. Using breaks to study socially is not new. For example, Garfinkel (1967) and Callon (1984), among others, suggested focusing on breaks and controversies. But these breaks are considered as ruptures in the social patterns. They happen when the movement is put straight back. The laugh is different as it is a call for movement. It shows that the social pattern is not adequate anymore in a situated activity. Studying the social dynamisms from the laughs might be an interesting way to understand the organization from the mundane and daily breaks that happen in activities. This could be an invitation for further developments based on the study of laughs, as a way to understand this constant 'in-betweenness' between movement and materiality that constitutes organization.

Conclusion

Henri Bergson's philosophy is above all an attempt to surpass the debate between realism and idealism in philosophy and his thought might help us to conceptualize differently what an organization is. With notions such as movement, *durée*, materiality, image, and so on, the philosopher tried to show how we go and forth constantly between the assumptions of the idealism and the ones of the realism, by claiming that the reality is a movement, but the only way to comprehend the movement is to materialize it. His philosophy can be understood as an in-between philosophy, that is a philosophy where the materiality and the movement meet each other; not as two different phenomena or ontologies but as a unique dynamic. This balance between *durée* and materiality is called *organization*. In such a perspective,

organization is the very process in which the world is both experienced as perceptions and defined as an intelligible reality. Following this, organization studies would be the very study of the making of *images* and their configuration by focussing on activities; that is what we name the social, the material, the actors, the power, the domination, etc. and their relation. This statement resonates with various approaches in organization studies such as the process view, the performativity turn, the Communicative Constitution of Organizations turn, the practice turn, the socio-materiality turn and so on. Whatever the developments we can make from this philosophy, we should keep in mind that Henri Bergson, above all, highlighted the limits of our intelligence to understand the reality, and this can be understood as a call for humility and ethic regarding the status of the knowledge we produce.

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