Something happened: Spectres of organization/disorganization at the airport

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Abstract
The article explores the practical accomplishment of organization at an international airport during the course of a number of ‘security alerts’ that disrupted routine ‘modes of ordering’ (Law, 1994). Airports, we suggest, invite us to re-think ‘organization’ as the partial, contingent and always-incomplete outcome of complex order(ing)s and disorder(ing)s played out across various spaces, agencies and materials. When ‘something happens’ we begin to see how spaces, agents and materials are subject to unexpected becomings: objects appear treacherous, spaces mutable, agencies ineffectual and informants unreliable. Following the work of Weick we might say that in such moments of uncertainty we are forced to reconsider our customary ways of thinking about objects, subjects and systems. We argue this thinking requires a relational understanding of organization so that we can better grasp how organizations are continuously being made and un-made through an on-going co-creation and dispersal of parts.

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Introduction

Whatever we might mean by ‘organization’ can be ultimately said to come down to practical endeavours to ‘limit the randomness of events’ (Bauman, 2008: 125). Organizations in this sense should be understood as attempts to ‘manipulate the world’s probabilities, so as ‘to make some events more likely than some others’ (Bauman, 2008: 125). Indeed, over the last few decades, and in line with developments in other social sciences, a number of strands in organization studies have begun to question the fixity, stability and self-evidence of their objects of study. They have sought instead to understand the processes through which such objects arise and come to have particular effects (e.g. Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Chia, 1998; Cooren, 2004, 2009; Cunliffe, 2003; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005; Weick, 1979; Wood, 2005). A common theme in much of this work is a view of organizing as ongoing ‘appropriation[s] of order out of disorder’. Order, Cooper (1986: 328) tells us, ‘is extracted as form and disorder refused as non-form’. One implication that can be drawn from this line of argument is that order and organization are only meaningful as the overcoming of disorder and disorganization, while disorder and disorganization are themselves recognizable only in the expectation of order and organization (Munro, 2001b). Ultimately, then, order and disorder, and organization and disorganization, are parasitical upon one another (Cooper, 1986; Serres, 1982). It follows that any inquiry into organization ‘as it happens’ (Schatzki, 2006) must also be inquiry into disorganization as ‘it’ happens. Yet there are few examples of this in organization studies. This is not altogether surprising. Clearly, the task of ‘making sense’ of organizations/disorganizations as they happen, that is to say as events rather than as objects, poses acute conceptual and methodological challenges for organizational research. Researchers are still predisposed to look for the organization and thus remain in thrall to the metaphysics of ‘its’ presence (Ford and Harding, 2004). Organizational researchers are not, after all, themselves immune to the appeal of ‘form’ (and to the horrors of ‘non-form’).

A focus on the happening of organization calls into question the ostensibly self-evident distinctions between stable entities and transient events. ‘Stability’ itself begins to be understood less as a starting point and more as an accomplishment – an outcome of ongoing labours of ‘entropic smoothing’ (Ravetz, 1971). Tsoukas and Chia (2002), for instance, liken this process to the illusory stability of the tightrope walker who remains upright only by continuously correcting their position. One way in which such challenges might be met is through the development of analyses that allow us to recover the processual, contingent and emergent character of phenomena (spaces, agencies and materials) that in mainstream studies are conventionally made to appear only in the form of discrete static entities (Cooper, 2005). Indeed, we have in recent years seen the long-standing interest in questions of ‘relationality’ in social theory (e.g. Barad, 2011; Mol, 2002) begin to be reflected in organization studies in a number of distinctive ways (Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000; Chia and Holt, 2006; Cooper, 2005; Hernes, 2008; Suchman, 2011).
At the same time, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Chia and Holt, 2006; Cunliffe, 2001; Law, 1994; Suchman, 2011; Wood, 2005), the importation of relational thinking to practical problems of organizing has tended to remain rather abstract and programmatic. There is relatively little translation of theoretical arguments into empirical analyses of the mundane activities and preoccupations of the social agents engaged in the on-going accomplishment of organization (and the naming and containment of dis-organization). This article, then, is intended as a contribution, and in some ways a challenge, to this still-emerging processual-relational ‘turn’ in organization studies, through an approach that attempts to take seriously the methodological and empirical challenges of researching the happening of organization/disorganization. Following Weick (e.g. 1979, 1993, 2005), our empirical investigation is focused on a number of ambiguous disruptive events. Our aim is to understand not merely how such events ‘happened in an organization’ (the standard preoccupation of management and organization studies) but, equally, how particular organizations/disorganizations happened in the events.

**Research site and methods**

The locus of investigation drawn upon in this article is a major UK airport we (pseudonymously) call ‘Westwich International Airport’, where we have been conducting research on information systems in the routine production and consumption of business knowledge. The first phase of empirical work was conducted by the present authors between 2004 and 2006 utilizing a range of qualitative research methods. These included non-participant observation, the investigation of documents and a series of open-ended and semi-structured interviews. The majority of observational work and interviewing was carried out with two or more members of the research team present. A key feature of the method was our effort to engage with interview-based material as occasions of ‘practical reasoning’ in which organization (as a verb as well as a noun) was being variously represented and ‘accomplished’ by its members (see, for instance, Knox et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Rosen, 1988, 1991). Encouraged by the quality of access achieved, the initial research project was followed by a second phase of empirical work: an ethnographic study of Westwich carried out by one of the present authors full-time between 2009 and 2010 and part-time until 2013.

The main business of an airport (putting people up in the air and bringing them safely down again) demands high-reliability organization (e.g. Roberts, 1988; Weick and Roberts, 1993). At the same time, Westwich can be described as a site where a range of different ‘modes of ordering’ – as enacted in the work of security, baggage handling, retail and so forth – can be observed at work (Knox et al., 2008; Law, 1994; Mol, 2002). Indeed, the airport defies straightforward classification as an organization (‘Westwich International’) or as a collection of organizations (airlines, baggage handling companies, retailers, law enforcement agencies etc.). As will become apparent in the course of this article, it can be viewed as one or the other at different moments in time and in relation to particular events.

As we shall endeavour to show, a focus on the happening of organization requires us to ask how the entities themselves – to which the stability of the object ‘organization’ is typically deferred – ‘happen’. The research questions this article sets out to address can therefore be summed up as follows:
1. What are the *spaces* of organization/disorganization, and how are they enacted (Dale and Burrell, 2007; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004)?

2. Who/what are the *agencies* of organization/disorganization and how do they emerge (Chia, 1998; Ng and de Cock, 2002; Wood, 2005)?

3. What are the *materials* of organization/disorganization, and how are they ordered/dis-ordered (Gherardi, 2010; Law, 1994, 2004; Suchman, 2011)?

Such questions, as we will show, do not remain simply ‘theoretical’ or purely ‘academic’, but are ones that are confronted by organizational participants as pressing practical problems.

Our attention to spaces, agencies and materials allows us to trace a series of unexpected ‘becomings’ (hybridities, miscigenations, reversals and proliferations) that happen in-between and with-in, as well as outside, established modes of ordering (security, commercial/retail development, terminal operations management etc.). In our treatment of these questions in this article, we juxtapose and integrate details from our research diaries, photographs and notebooks, together with subsequent analyses and reflections. In doing so, the uncertainties and ambiguities of the events we were part of inevitably seep into our descriptive style. Clearly, any shift from what Shotter (2006) calls ‘aboutness thinking’ to ‘withness thinking’ – seen as crucial to realizing the potential of relationality as a ‘methodic’ research practice in organization studies – precludes the tone of detached omniscience which characterizes so much writing on organization.

‘Bringing you closer to the world’

On the 23 September 2005 something happened at Westwich International Airport. We ‘happened’ to be at the airport that day researching the work of Air Traffic Control (ATC). Our plan for the day was for three researchers to observe the routine work of ATC by working overlapping shifts to cover an 18-hour period. One member of our team had been with ATC since 06.00 a.m.; another was on her way to the control tower to begin her shift, whilst a third researcher was still at his office preparing for his shift later that day. Just after 09.00 a.m. a number of individuals donned yellow luminescent safety jackets and began to circulate through the crowds gathering in the airport terminal check-in hall – some with walkie-talkies, others with headsets and some with loudhailers. This phalanx of dispersed yellow began to address the ‘lonely crowd’ (Augé, 1995) of airport users. It seemed as if they were attempting to direct those present to vacate the concourse and make their way to the nearest exit.

**Terminal 1, 09.56 a.m.**

I arrived at the airport on the 09:56 train and made my way up to Terminal 1, on my way to ATC. As I walked along the skywalk connecting station and terminal it became increasingly apparent that something strange was going on (see Figure 1). Lots of people were walking back towards the station and I wondered whether or not something had happened in the terminal.

As I got closer to the terminal the masses of people got denser and workers from the shops and airlines also appeared. I had already noticed that there were some people looking out of the
windows at some police cars. There are often police around the airport, but today they were gathered together by one of the back entrances and so my first thought was that they were there to escort someone or something in through the back entrance and onto a plane. But looking around I realized there were more police than normal parked all around the car park and blocking off all the roads to the airport site. I asked someone what was going on and they said that the terminal was closed. I started to talk to a cleaner about what had happened and she said, ‘an Asian lad threw a bag over the fence’ and so they had closed the terminal. She said despairingly that there had been a security threat the day before as well: ‘it took six police to apprehend him’: ‘scary isn’t it?’, she said to me.

The scene bordered on confusion and torpidity: all manner of gesticulation and articulation was being deployed in an effort to communicate and to urge people to move away in an orderly fashion. Some began to make their way towards the car parks, while others were heading towards the ‘skywalk’ that takes passengers to and from the train station. In places, however, crowds were beginning to gather and queues began to form. Access to the train station soon became blocked, creating a tailback of passengers. Tension seemed to be rising. Knotted groups of people were beginning to form amidst a shuffling, agitated mass. Some people sat down. Others talked. A number of individuals were staring resignedly into the middle distance. One or two took the opportunity to sit down and catch some sleep. Meanwhile, like a contagion, rumours started to spread … sudden outbursts of impatience and frustration could be heard.

**Station concourse, 10.10 a.m.**

A woman in a fluorescent top now starts ordering people around and I suggest we should probably move downstairs as she is getting quite irate; a man then says, ‘Oh! I wouldn’t listen to her, she’s just a cleaner’. When I go downstairs, I look to see if anyone is using the WANDA\(^4\) information kiosks and see one person flicking distractedly through the screens. It’s not clear if
they are looking for information or just bored and using it as entertainment. Elsewhere we are told that ‘people from Terminal 2 are being held in arrivals’. I also see a uniformed guard and can hear him speaking: ‘NATS has been closed down and there are no flights in or out’.

Seen as a management problem, disorder is intimately related to the ‘problem’ of uncertainty. Management writers such as Thompson (1967: 159) identify uncertainty as ‘Other’ – what ‘organization’ is meant to overcome – and he has described overcoming uncertainty as ‘the essence of the administrative process’. ‘Organization’, in this sense, is coterminous with the pursuit of certainty or, at least, the reduction of uncertainty (Weick, 1979). In an airport, the demand for certainty is typically expressed as the quest for ‘high reliability organization’ (e.g. Roberts, 1988; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Whilst invested in a multiplicity of mechanisms of prediction and control, the airport appears permanently ‘haunted’ (in the sense of Derrida, 2006) by the ever-present possibilities of terror and disaster. Thus, recurrent announcements caution passengers never to leave their luggage unattended. A small, discreetly placed plaque commemorates the victims of a 1980s air disaster. Likewise, next to a busy slip road a memorial garden has been established for the victims of airport related incidents since the Second World War. Especially since 9/11, airport users are increasingly perceived not as the self-described network society’s confident ‘kinetic elite’ (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995) but as anxious and insecure subjects (e.g. House of Commons Transport Committee, 2007; Lewis, 2007: T4).

Westwich International’s promise of organization (‘Bringing you closer to the world’) is manifest in the form of precise timetables and detailed flight plans – material re-presentations of its success in ‘manipulating the world’s probabilities’ (Bauman, 1991: 1). Westwich’s flight information displays, for instance, portray snapshots of predictable futures: futures that are know-able in advance and have in this sense been ‘emptied’ of innumerable contingencies – futures that have, as it were, ‘already happened’ (Luhmann, 1982: 281, 316–320). And yet on that day in September much of what is considered ‘functional’ about an airport appeared in limbo. Rumours of the Other’s (qua dis-organization) uncalled-for reappearance circulate as speculations about probable causes, the presence of armed police personnel and so forth. As the clocks continued to accrue minutes, the check-in and boarding times displayed on the screen became obsolete one by one. The airport’s machineries of prediction appeared to malfunction, and uncertainty was leaking back in.

Spaces

ATC, 10.40 a.m.

‘Go to twenty-five and hold over … Yeah, Roger Delta three-niner-seven-zero, we got ya.’ The intensity and attentiveness of the radar guy beside me heightened my anxiety as he rapidly spoke to different planes while writing in marker on badges on the four rows in front of me. Each badge was a plane full of people. When Joe came on shift and Matt went off for a break, he immediately started talking about ‘an incident’. Joe is talking about how someone had come onto ‘the apron’ and thrown a bag down there. Security had grabbed him and he ‘looked like he was a Pakistani’. It is all a little confusing and there is quite a lot of information to take in. Joe jokes that this individual was a relative of a passenger trying to hand over luggage that had been forgotten. Fairly quickly the busyness of ATC takes over.
In the background, Brian is quietly getting on with his supervisory duties, visiting each of the area ATCs in turn. ‘Yes, there was an incident,’ he tells us, ‘there was a suitcase on the apron, but security has dealt with it’. However, he now continues, ‘there is a bomb in a car in the car park of Terminal 1, and everyone from Terminals 1 and 2 are being evacuated’. We could be too, ‘so be prepared to lose your aircraft’, he tells us. Joe was told to inform the military about what had happened and Brian tells us to ‘look up procedures’. Joe puts ‘the procedures’ up on a small screen above us; it was difficult to read the writing but we all squinted up … ‘If we have to leave,’ Brian begins to tell us a little later, ‘you can’t go and wait beside Terminal 1 car park, we’ve got to go to the hall by departures in Terminal 3’. He says this twice, to emphasize the point. Whenever there was a break Joe kept coming back to the incident to reaffirm that he had worked in the air force and ‘knew about bombs’. If there was a bomb, a parcel bomb, for example, Joe is telling us, a 200-metre area would have to be cleared. If a car bomb was involved, then 500 metres were needed.

I went off for a break with Joe, through the coded doors into a rest and drinks area that looked out high over the airport. We could see Terminal 1 car park: it was deserted and rather close. ‘It’s only 200 metres,’ said Joe, ‘so the car bomb must be at the far end’. I hoped it was but felt rather dissociated and hardly worried at the time about the floor to ceiling glass and instead starting fussing about how to get a cappuccino out of the vending machine. When I moved into the lounge area next door, the TV was on and ITV had ‘breaking news’. Westwich had been closed following an incident in which a man had run through the security area. We all watched, knowing better, but watching carefully in case they said something we had not heard. I feel rather smug: ITV news was talking about us.

The disruptions of the un-usual and the un-expected makes airport spaces appear less and less as ‘containers’ (see Cooper, 2005) and more and more as enactments: spacings (Latour, 1997). From a relational viewpoint, the familiar notion of organizational spaces as (mere) containers, within which organizational actors perform, is possible only insofar as particular space-ings become stabilized, reified and, importantly, ‘backgrounded’ in ongoing, standardized enactments. They thus merge into the un-remark-able ‘ground’ that allows the ‘figure’ of ‘the Organization’ to appear as a self-evident bounded presence. Disruptions to spacing activities allow us to perceive space no longer as a set of stable containers housed within an organization, but rather as a much more unsteady medium giving rise to multiple and unpredictable ‘spatial-becomings’ (Massey, 2005) that transgress any easily identifiable location such as might be provided by the typical duality of inside/outside demarcations.

Suddenly, then, space intrudes as a problem to be negotiated – a figure of anxiety. During moments of uncertainty, participants – including ourselves – are reminded of the contingency of spacings as we become increasingly aware of the multiplicity and mutability of spaces that are routinely normalized and ‘backgrounded’ in the repetitive and pragmatic routines of organization (Dale and Burrell, 2003; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). Space ‘returns’ as problematic whenever events disrupt the entropic smoothing routinely performed by the agents and the apparatuses of organization.

Joe is looking out of the plate glass window that provides a vista out onto the T1 car park. As a material, the glass no longer seems so light or transparent but now announces itself as a potentially dangerous object – a death-trap. In addition, on this occasion, the view it offers no longer seems to reassure that the car park is ‘outside’, some distance away, but confirms it is actually on the inside, at the heart of the airport infrastructure.
Against this backdrop, Joe appears to be simultaneously articulating two, inconsistent, ‘measurements’ of space. If there is a car bomb, the car park is close indeed: only 200 metres away. On the other hand, given that Joe seems to discount the possibility of a car bomb, on the grounds that ATC have not (yet?) been evacuated, 200 metres might not be very close at all, but actually safely off in the distance.

As questions of what does, or does not, constitute a ‘safe distance’ continue to be nervously debated, the coded security doors and the narrow, warren-like corridors that take you into the (formerly) secure ‘darkroom’ of ATC, begin to take on the guise of a ‘mouse-trap’ – an enclosure that may be a ‘mere’ 200 metres from where there could well be a car bomb hiding in the anonymity of a multi-storey car park. The ‘darkroom’, surrounded by a thin membrane of concrete wall, removed and remote from the hustle and bustle of the airport crowd, is no longer quite the secure safe haven it once appeared. The wall – meant to keep outsiders out and to insulate the inside from the interference of the outside – begins to resemble a prison-like enclosure, its occupants increasingly uncertain about what is meant by ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. The ‘object’ in the car park appears to be, as it were, distorting the orderings around it, giving rise to all manner of strange becomings, reversals and re-assemblages. The properties of space are defined not in absolute terms (Whitehead’s [1985] ‘simple location’), but in terms of their changing relations to other spaces, agencies and materials.

Agents

In the on-going efforts to smooth spatial and temporal disruptions, it is not clear who is trustworthy as a source of reliable knowledge. When Joe tells us that there would have to be a 500-metre clearance area if a car bomb had been found, we might be prompted to ask if he actually knows this or whether he is merely articulating his assumptions about what constitutes good organization, that is, that the agents of order and security, on discovering a car bomb, would know the distance between the car park and the ATC dark room and would have already evacuated ATC. On the other hand, his claim might reflect over-excited speculation nourished by the ‘real-time’ television drama of ITV’s ‘breaking news story’. Perhaps we should ‘hear’ such statements as performative rather than informative (Cunliffe, 2001; Ng and de Cock, 2002). Joe (and Brian) might be fulfilling the obligation to be seen to ‘know’ – to be demonstrating competence and authority through reassurance: ‘things are in hand’. We can therefore ‘hear’ in such fragmented stories the practical activity of members engaged in what we might call (paraphrasing Weick et al., 2005: 409) the narrative enactment of organization.

Indeed, spaces, objects and organizational agencies appear co-implicated in a reciprocal performativity. For instance, the ‘bomb in the car park’ brings out the ex-RAF man in Joe, who is knowledgeable about explosives and thus in a position to manage his fellow controllers (potential terrorist victims). Indeed, established organizational hierarchies and lines of managerial authority are subject to confusion across Westwich. Recent work in actor-network theory (ANT) and in studies associated with the Montreal School of the Constitutive Communication of Organization highlight the interdependencies and (Derridean) supplementarities between forms of human and textual agency (e.g. Cooren, 2004, 2010; Taylor and van Every, 2011: 38–63). The failure of both these forms of agency is now in evidence. Screens
and directional signs have lost their authority – their ability to speak for organization – and are now mere ‘ghostly’ versions of themselves (Cooren, 2009) instructing people to go to areas that are now inaccessible. Other forms of authoritative voice are sought by participants who appear as if they are no longer able to ‘read’ airport spaces properly. In the concourse, we see individuals in suits appearing to step outside the crowd as if to make claims about their identity. On the one hand, their appearance cues us (the crowd) to think that they might be airport managers or plain-clothes security officers assisting in the management of evacuation. On the other hand, they could equally be business passengers merely helping others find their way out. In the absence of spatio-textual ‘order’ (correct place-ing and thus clear definition of the ‘contents’ of organization), formerly innocuous and inconsequential objects begin to be cast into relief and invested with renewed significance. The possession of a walkie-talkie or a safety jacket appears sufficient to command authority. Authority is projected (on account of their uniforms) onto employees who work in retail franchises who in the course of the evacuation have also gathered in the terminal concourse. Here they become surrounded by a mass of bewildered passengers looking for guidance and instruction. Even the cleaners are no longer invisible. Their yellow jackets have now become invested by many in the milling crowds with renewed significance – as figures of authority, able to speak (and act) ‘for’ Westwich. For others, she still lacks authority and as somebody tells us, ‘I wouldn’t listen to her, she’s just a cleaner’. The relations between objects – uniforms, directional signage, yellow jackets, walkie-talkies and so forth – and the forms of agency they enact and signify, appear unstable and in flux.

A key ‘symptom of disorder’, argues Bauman (1991: 1) ‘is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly’. As researchers, we are not immune to such feelings. Like the passengers and staff at Westwich airport, we are also participants trying to ‘make sense of events’ by processing and selecting from various incoming streams of information. In an ironic twist to Law’s (1994: 45) dictum, ‘[w]here the action is, the ethnographer is not’, we find ourselves busily ringing colleagues and scrolling through news organizations’ websites in order to find out what is happening where we are. ‘One of the piers at Westwich’s Terminal 2 was evacuated by police this morning after a suspect package was found,’ states the BBC:

Witnesses described how a man carrying a suitcase managed to get on to the apron – where planes are parked – before trying to flee when confronted by police. Officers used a stun gun to stop the man before kicking the case to safety.

‘Did you witness the terror arrest?’ asks one online edition of the ‘Westwich Herald’. The story leads with the following summary: ‘The man was detained following a dramatic struggle near Terminal One after he breached a security perimeter and ran 200 metres across the apron with guards and officers in pursuit’. The evening news later runs with a story that the ‘Man who caused a major terror alert is shot with Taser gun’. Some people saw him wielding a mobile phone; we are reminded that the Madrid bombings were triggered by mobile phone text messages. ‘The suspect, who, according to one unconfirmed report,’ the online version of The Times reads, ‘is of Asian appearance and shouting the word “Allah”’. ‘Targeting ordinary people again!’, writes ‘Andy from Westwich’ via email; ‘Should have used a real gun!’. Responding to this, ‘Dominic’ writes,
...you need a big wake up call [Andy]. This country is under attack from terrorist groups and I like many others who have travelled out of Westwich Airport want security to be tight as you can not [sic] take chances in circumstances like that.

When something ‘unexpected’ happens this is often experienced, by participants and observers alike, as the displacement of ‘information’ by noise. Because people tend to abhor a vacuum they attempt to fill it with narrative and meaning. New information and communication technologies ensure that information voids become rapidly ‘filled’, partially and unevenly, by an inflow of inconsistent and contradictory stories (cf. Weick, 1979). When something happens, fragments of ‘information’ are rapidly extracted and distilled by agents in order to inform a plausible and coherent account of an event that is simultaneously being spoken and acted into life. During the event, ‘what is happening’ is still formless, shape-shifting across categories, at the mercy of what resembles a viral-like contagion.5

Re-organization therefore presupposes and requires the disposal or rather the displacement of this excess (Munro, 2001a). Only with the construction of an authoritative ordering of events, underpinned by the persuasion of expertise and the discourses of authority, can organization begin to regain its shape. That is to say, ‘organization’ begins to be restored only when ‘what happened’ has been correctly ‘placed’. A ‘happening’, argue Cooper and Law (1995),

...is ‘nothing’ – or, rather, ‘no thing’, no object, no form ... [until] properly articulated, ordered, organized. Only when it takes its place in the network of what has already happened does it become ordered and organized, and translated into an effect.

Processes of organization constantly strive to, as it were, strip events – whether of the past, present or future – of their event-full character and of the sense that they ‘happen (and be experienced) only once’ (Cooren, 2009: 44). Commentators from Derrida (2002; Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004) to Žižek (2014) have thus described this kind of re-framing in terms of ‘dis-eventalization’ (Žižek, 2014: 162). Conversely, we might say that the extent to which ‘something’, however minor, comes to be experienced as an event, that is to say as ‘Other’ than what is fore-seen, becomes a reflection of an organization’s un-readiness for it.6

By late afternoon of 23 September a narrative had indeed taken shape that authoritatively accounted for ‘what happened’ and ‘who’ was responsible: A man of ‘Asian-looking appearance’ had been arrested and detained under the 1983 Mental Health Act. A suitcase had been removed from the runway and Security was attending to the ‘weak point’ in the perimeter fence.

The long line of police cars, fire engines and ambulances return to their bases. The scramble of speculation subsides and organization seems to settle back into the comfort of a familiar flow of identifiable things. The check-in desks have been re-opened and the information monitors are once again showing passengers what gate to go to; the skywalk is clear and flowing; coffee is being served in the cafes; people in shop uniforms are back in their shops; the cleaner has picked up her bucket and mop and is once again wiping clean the floor. The protean and mutable alternations of space ‘calm down’ as boundaries...
recover their familiarity, re-establishing ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ and ‘here’ versus ‘there’. Taxonomic integrity has been restored and objects have returned to their proper places. For the moment at least, a bag has reverted to being ‘just’ a bag and a mobile phone is no longer a potential triggering device. The cycle of aeroplane arrivals and departures swings back into life as the ATC tower chief, who described himself to us as a conductor, takes up his baton once again.

Materials

Tempting as it is to conclude our account with a moment of closure (re-organization), it would be misleading. Derrida (2006) has used the notion of ‘spectrality’ to account for the various ways in which the absent presence of traumatic events – events we could argue of the future as well as the past – impinge upon and disrupt practices of closure. Therefore, and following this line of argument, instead of discrete ‘incidents’ that “punctuate the stability of ‘the organization’, it might be more appropriate to view such events as immanent – as absent presences. Indeed, a key part of the organizational work performed by Westwich is devoted to efforts to foresee and plan for the next time ‘something’/‘same thing’ happens. But, frustratingly for those who put their faith in techniques and processes of anticipation (from ante ['before'] + capere ['take']) and control, ‘something’ will always come to pass that appears to exceed the mechanism of identification and prediction set up precisely to guard against its arrival. We become keenly aware of this when something does indeed happen – this time on 11 August 2006, when Westwich, along with all UK airports, was brought to a standstill by what was called a ‘critical security alert’ (the highest). This was triggered by the overnight arrest of 24 British nationals in connection with a plot to detonate five to 12 (depending on which newspaper you read) aeroplanes using makeshift bombs. The bombs were to be assembled during the flight using liquid explosives (smuggled aboard in drinks bottles), with mobile phones acting as detonators – ‘mass murder on an unimaginable scale’, as Paul Stephenson, Deputy Chief of the Metropolitan Police at the time, put it.

As we have seen, ‘high-reliability’ organization demands correct placement: precise dispositions of persons, spaces and material. For instance, Roberts (1988), in her study of US aircraft carriers, describes how the dangerous proximity of aircraft, fuel and munitions is managed through spatial arrangements and organizational routines that dictate what may be brought together and what must be kept apart. Similarly, airport organization has long operated the distinction between a ‘dirty’ landside and a ‘clean’ airside (Douglas, 1966). Passengers pass from ‘dirty’ to ‘clean’ status via cleansing rituals that commence at check-in (‘does your luggage contain any of these items …?’) and conclude with security controls on entry to airside. Materials, Barad (2007) cautions, are not ‘things’ but ‘doings’. A mundane object becomes an instrument of terror as it moves from one zone to another. Thus, in the wake of 9/11, each entrance to airside had been equipped with a Perspex vitrine where confiscated items such as razors, scissors and penknives (‘sharps’ in airport terminology) were collected as a reminder (and a warning) to travellers that innocuous (clean) objects ‘landside’ may be a dangerous (dirty) ‘airside’. The ontologic of ‘sharps’ has always been unstable in airport organization. Thus a pair of tweezers might count as a ‘sharp’ when a glass bottle would not – a common
example of mutual interference between ‘security’ and ‘commercial/retail’ orderings at Westwich. A mundane object becomes an instrument of terror as it moves from one zone to another.

Less than a year after the September 2005 event, however, such instabilities and interferences appeared to have become endemic as airport organization found itself struggling with the spectre of the ‘latent’ affordances of ordinary objects (a much-expanded list). Because the fulfilment of the promise of security is seen to require a much-expanded ability to ‘know in advance’, the agencies of security and order can only succeed in their mission if they can constantly out-guess the agencies of terror and dis-order. We have seen how the inability to fulfil the requirement for exhaustive (fore-) knowledge brought airports to a standstill in August 2006 as they were no longer able to process passengers and luggage effectively. Airport concourses began to resemble refugee camps: rubbish was strewn everywhere, while as yet unprocessed luggage was left on wet tarmacs as storage space ran out. Airlines lobbied to have the new procedures eased. ‘Britain,’ newspapers bemoaned, had been ‘grounded’. In the wake of the August 2006 events, whole new classes of objects, ‘drinks, soups, syrups, perfume, deodorant, shaving foam, aerosols, gel pens’ (Westwich website) had been exposed as capable of a double life as weapons. The airport’s own shops had to be closed, as there was nothing they could sell that was beyond suspicion. Not only have more materials become problematic (in terms of inhabiting shifting categories and exhibiting unstable properties), but also attempts to ‘manage’ this mutability can now be seen to be producing its own unforeseen effects. Even the human body can become an ‘intelligent’ time-bomb and, as newspaper images suggest, an airplane is only a hair’s breadth from becoming a missile.6 From the bottle bombs of August 2006, to the exploding underpants of Christmas 2009, absent presences increasingly haunt Thompson’s (1967) uncertainty-cleansing ‘administrative process’.

We can therefore observe Cooper’s (1986) notion of the disposal of ‘non-form’ being enacted in the work of airport security staff. Whilst Cooper identifies an abstract concept, we see the contingencies of a practical activity – in this case a form of labour that works to objectify anxiety (Heidegger’s [1962: 231] amorphous ‘angst’)7 by anchoring such anxieties on to particular objects, which can then be excluded in order to ensure safe passage.8 However, what we also observe is the inability of organization to rid itself of this Other. Indeed, ironically, the agencies of security often appear to be engaged in the labour of ‘enhancing’ the ‘fearsome object’ that Heidegger speaks about. That is to say their efforts unwittingly work to objectify and expand terror’s absent presence in the airport, leading not to its containment but rather to its institutionalization. As we move through the airport following the processual dynamics and inter-relations of materials, agents and spaces, we are struck by how airport organization is being increasingly reconfigured in relation to the object ‘terror’. This effect is particularly visible in its transformed spatial layouts, multiplying procedures of visibility and inspection and ever-changing rules of conduct. Airport-induced stress and anxiety are (a specially commissioned study states) ‘equal to facing riots’. Travellers, it claims, ‘suffer higher stress levels’ than do fighter pilots or Formula 1 drivers (Lewis, 2007: T4). As an ‘image of organization’ (Morgan, 1986), the ‘organization as a riot’ draws attention to the ceaseless mutual interference of the airport’s various ‘modes of ordering’. Each mode of ordering can be simultaneously considered a disordering from the viewpoint of other orderings.
Security procedures, as we have seen, designed to handle passengers as (potential) victims or security risks, are intruding upon arrangements originally designed to harness the agency of those same people as consumers (see Figure 2).

As Bauman (1991: 166) points out, what we might call the modern ‘will to order’ thrives in revealing ‘ever new layers of chaos … Modern consciousness … spurs into action by unmasking its ineffectiveness. It perpetuates the ordering bustle by disqualifying its achievements and laying bare its defects.’ Re-organization, as the never-ending (re-)construction(s) of stable, orderly, ‘predictable’ worlds, increasingly appears as the accomplishment of both order and disorder, and both certainty and uncertainty (Chia, 1998; Clegg et al., 2005; Cooper, 1986; Kallinikos, 1996). Thus, queues in airport terminals, the (by-)product of the quest for increased security, are – in the wake of events like the attempted suicide bombing of Glasgow airport – themselves identified as being ‘security risks’ (House of Commons Transport Committee, 2007).9 Un-certainty, insecurity and dis-organization, it seems, cannot be eliminated but are, instead, continually deferred and ‘differed’.

Discussion and conclusion

The challenge of studying organizations ‘as they happen’ (Schatzki, 2006) cannot but entail a shift in focus from entities onto events. In the course of studying events at the airport we quickly came up against the limits of approaches that foreground ‘the organization’ as composed of discrete entities and well-defined parts (agents, spaces and materials) that management assembles into a cohesive and functionally integral whole (e.g. McKelvey, 1997). Instead, when ‘something happens’, organization is revealed as a precarious, even transient, condition. The apparently ready-to-hand and ‘orderly’ elements
of organization appear simultaneously complicit in performances of disorganization. Organizations/disorganizations therefore appear to coexist within a single frame in a mutually constitutive, as well as repressive, parasitism. Spaces appear mutable, agencies ineffectual, objects treacherous and informants unreliable. The ‘entities’ to which the stability of the reified entity ‘organization’ is typically deferred, seem no longer able to function as stable referential anchors but acquire their presence and qualities primarily through their various relations and extended webs of differential association and entanglement.

Our approach draws upon what we might call the still emerging ‘relational turn’ in organization studies and speaks to the concerns of those interested in ‘process organization studies’ (e.g. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005; Wood, 2005), complexity (e.g. Bouchikhi, 1998; Tsoukas, 2005) and ANT (e.g. Law, 1994, 2002) – work that highlights processes and emergent properties as fundamental features of organization, which give rise to those more familiar entities and substances appealed to in the still predominant managerial ‘metaphysics of presence’. In extending this approach, our analysis has sought to move beyond the often rather abstract and programmatic (e.g. Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000; Cooper, 2007) theorizations of the relational basis of organizing. Instead, we have sought in this article to reveal the ways in which questions of ‘relationality’ are encountered in situ, by members, not as arcane philosophical issues but rather as pressing practical problems.

The ‘happening’ of organization/disorganization as it emerges out of our investigation in Westwich can therefore be summed up as follows.

Firstly, we might say that making organization ‘happen’ is coterminous with the enactment of presences and absences, probabilities and improbabilities (cf. Bauman, 2008: 125). Thus, airport organization, which in many ways epitomizes organized ‘modernity’, realizes itself in, and as, the reliable flow of ‘present futures’ and ‘future presents’ (Luhmann, 1982) and can therefore be envisioned as an architecture of anticipation (cf. Bauman, 1991; Weick and Roberts, 1993). It represents the demand for making the flow of events manageable via the creation of probabilities and improbabilities.

Clearly, organizational presences are always enacted against – and haunted by – the background ‘noise’ of multiple (‘latent’ in Cooper’s [2005] vocabulary) possibilities. Earlier in this article we have referred, or alluded, to Derrida’s (2006) notion of the ‘spectral’ as an apt description of this state of in-between Being and Nothingness. Spectres in this sense, although not quite real – or not quite present – disturb and disrupt whatever is deemed to be real and present with their ‘absence in advance’ (Derrida and Stiegler, 2013: 39). As we have shown, labours of anticipation are carried out against an ever-expanding horizon of such (‘latent’) possible occurrences; possibilities that continually appear to exceed and elude the mechanisms of organizational foreknowledge and pre-diction. Airport organization therefore appears deferred, incomplete, and in constant need of a ‘fix’. However, as we have seen, the outcomes of each of these fixes – the recruitment of new agents, the enrolment of new forms of knowledge, the deployment of new technologies and the re-organization of airport spaces – remain, at best, ambiguous.

Second, what we encounter is not the unfolding of a singular ‘Order’ but rather the co-existence of multiple overlapping (and, as we have seen, mutually interfering) orderings. Indeed, an ‘ordering’ can be viewed as dis-ordering from the point of view of a
different ordering (Knox et al., 2008; Law, 1994; Thompson, 2008). (See also Bouchikhi (1998), de Rond and Bouchikhi (2004), Lewis (2000) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) on the inevitability of paradox in organization.) When, in August 2006, for instance, attempts were made to ‘(re)order’ entirely in terms of ‘security’, UK airports ceased to function as airports. Orderings, therefore, do not as such eliminate disorder. Rather, organizations as they ‘happen’ routinely generate, accommodate and enfold various disorder(ing)s (e.g. Clegg et al., 2005; Snook, 2002).

Third, and relatedly, even what is ‘refused’ – Othered as ‘non-form’ – cannot ultimately be fully disposed of. Rather, it shall be argued, the Other(ed) is (at best) constantly deferred and differed within and between orderings. Much like Banquo’s ghost at Macbeth’s table, it remains an absent presence permanently haunting proceedings: re-organizations produce anxiety and disorganization; ‘counter-terrorism’ unwittingly further institutionalizes ‘terror’, security procedures generate new targets, and so forth. Whatever is construed as dis-organization, in-security and dis-order cannot, it seems, be eradicated but rather becomes the object of ongoing labours of deferral and differal. Order and disorder, organization and disorganization, are the making, as well as the unmaking, of each other. Thus, apparently paradoxically, in-security and dis-order can often appear to be by-products of the intermittent quest for order.

A relational study of organizing therefore opens up the possibility of an alternative to the view that disorder(ing) is the straightforward effect of external agency (a man of ‘Asian appearance’ throws a bag over the perimeter fence) imposing on the ‘organizational system’ the need to re-order itself. Our account suggests that it makes as much sense to seek the ‘cause’ in the system’s own consuming need to, as it were, be constantly one step ahead of itself. This, in turn, creates the possibility that a minor incident such as the erratic behaviour of a single individual can paralyse a major international airport – with inevitable knock-on effects throughout the Castellian (Castells, 1996) ‘space of flows’. Massumi, in his account of a 2005 ‘toxic substance alert’ in Montreal airport (where the ‘toxic substance’ turned out to be a bag of flour), also touches on this last point. Such events, Massumi claims, signal the birth of the ‘affective fact’, where

\[
\ldots \] the identity of the possible object determines the affective quality of the actual situation \ldots \\
Its quality has actualized, without the object itself materializing. It has taken affective passage from the future to the present, on the coattails of the time-inverse sign of alarm. (Massumi, 2005: 9)

Our own suggestion is that such ‘affective facts’, Derridean ‘anachronisms’ (see Derrida, 2006), can be traced to what we have called the ‘absent presences’ that inevitably haunt the managerial quest for predict-able worlds (Kallinikos, 1996; Luhmann, 1982).

Colville et al. (2013)’s study of the actions of the actors involved in the shooting of Brazilian student Jean-Charles de Menezes (mistaken for a suspected potential suicide bomber) in the London Underground also speaks to this point. Colville et al. find that the mistake was caused by the deployment of organizational sense-making frames and routines that were not sufficiently sensitive to the complexity and ambiguity of empirical cues. Thus, relatively minor elements in the suspect’s appearance, behaviour or
comportment were abstracted and taken as confirmatory evidence of the veracity of the prevailing sense-making frame, and in so doing triggered the sequence of events that led to the shooting. In this light, de Menezes’s tragic death appears as a failed exorcism of the spectre of the suicide bomber, ‘the man of Asian appearance’, who in the minds of his pursuers he came to incarnate. Perhaps the spectre cannot be fully exorcised. Mechanisms and processes of prediction, far from resolving problems of organization, can often have a role in producing the very situations that they seek to anticipate. This line of argument takes us somewhat beyond the interpretive possibilities available within conventional organizational approaches to crisis and sense-making and prompts us to speculate that the agent of disorder (‘the man of Asian-looking appearance’) might be equally thought of as a symptom of the endeavour to assuage the system’s own ‘nervousness’ (to paraphrase Taussig [1992]) – that is to say, of the imperative to demonstrate and reassure that not anything might happen next.

Methodologically, a relational perspective requires us to re-focus organizational inquiry to better understand how shifts in relations between agencies, spaces and materials start to change the qualities of these very ‘entities’ and of the ‘effects’ that might be attributed to them. Approaching the ordering work (including processes of sense-making and meaning-making) that ‘organization’ entails in this way, we have been able to illustrate how such entities form, de-form and re-form in response to the pushes and pulls of their ongoing engagements and disengagements with other entities (in short, their relationality). Working within this frame of reference forces us to acknowledge that it is not sufficient to ‘follow’ actors, materials etc. through the events (as actor–network approaches might have once enjoined us). Instead, we propose that we must pay greater attention to the relational possibilities, tensions, conflicts and ambiguities wittingly or unwittingly put in play within organizational processes of anticipation and prediction, which in turn make it possible (or impossible) for specific agencies, materials and spaces to ‘happen’.

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Notes

1 We interviewed 39 members of the organization, including senior executives responsible for strategy, information systems developers, terminal space planning modellers, customer service agents and supervisors of baggage handling operations.

2 Over time and with continued access to the host organization one realizes that an interview is partly constitutive of the way an interlocutor understands their organization and, depending on the question, acts to variously prompt new insights into roles, responsibilities and events.

3 Joining the department responsible for major projects in the airport group and working on terminal projects we gained practical experience of the complexities and intricacies involved in managing and operating an international airport. Crucially, this phase of research gave access
to the work of the safety and security teams, and participation in a number of emergency and evacuation events improved our understanding of the nuances and subtleties involved in the interpretation and application of procedures designed to handle events and mitigate disruptions. We therefore had greater context in which to interpret the observational and interview data we collected during phase 1 of the research, and this enhanced our understanding of the reflexive and contingent nature of interview data.

Unlike Colville et al. (2013: 1206) – with whose study this article has much in common – who ‘chose not to include media coverage’ in their research data, we see here that real-time events are inextricably entwined with multiple media channels that inform and deform each other.

We are grateful to one of the *Human Relations* reviewers for her/his valuable suggestions and her/his urging to develop and clarify these points.

Fear, argued Heidegger (1962: 231), has an object, whereas anxiety/dread (*angst*) exhibits indeterminacy in the face of which ‘everyday familiarity collapses’.

We are thus reminded of Freud’s (1959) discussion of ‘displacement’, in which one fear is substituted for another (more manageable) one. Little Hans, for instance, has a phobia of horses (which he can avoid) as a way of managing a much more profound fear, the fear of the father – the fear of castration.

For instance,

One of my concerns is that we are creating new targets. We have lines of people in terminals now, 200, 300 people in a queue, your bag is not searched when you go in or out, you can take … 23kg of ammonium nitrate mix [which] would … make a good impact. (Expert witness quoted in House of Commons Transport Committee [2007: 31])

**References**


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