



# Organizations as discursive gravitational fields

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a metaphor of organizations as discursive gravitational fields.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The metaphor was built based on Einstein's general theory of relativity and Lacan's theory of discourse. The dialogue with organization studies was made possible through the utilization of the communicative theory of organizations as theoretical background.

**Findings** – A number of insights were derived from the metaphor. First, organizations can distort their discursive surroundings up to the point of stopping any flux of independent discourse; second, the boundaries of organizations are to be understood as a gradient of discursive influence which fades away, often much beyond its legal limits; that also creates degrees of "stakeholding", corresponding to different levels of influence and dependence on a specific organization by their stakeholders; third, the discursive fields of different organizations are often superposed, creating the phenomena of interference and superposition among organizational discursive fields; fourth, speciation among organizations is related to the kind of symbolic element attracted predominantly by their surrounding fields; and fifth, Lacanian theory suggests that no absolute and permanent discursive power is possible to persons or organizations, leaving room to the continuous production of new and potentially emancipating meaning, whose appearance, however, can be very difficult to predict due to its "discursive quantum nature".

**Practical implications** – This metaphor can help researchers and managers to interpret the discursive phenomena involving organizations as a whole, as well as organizational relations with stakeholders.

**Originality/value** – By bringing together organization theory, Einstein's and Lacan's theories, this paper provides a new view on the relation between organizations, discourse and society.

**Keywords** Organizations, Metaphors, Society, Discourse, Gravitation, Lacan, Einstein

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

We have been living in a society dominated by organizations for already some time (Perrow, 1991). Just adding to that trend, the recent development of new technologies of communication (Namsu *et al.*, 2009; Yuqing *et al.*, 2007) has been associated with the spreading of such organizing approach to daily life also to areas of human activity, like social interaction, that until recently were much more disorganized and spontaneous. The seemingly anarchic freedom of virtual environments like Facebook and Twitter is in fact dependent on major business operations that have excelled in their own organizing abilities.

In this paper I present a metaphor of organizations as discursive gravitational fields, based in Einstein's general theory of relativity (Einstein, 1993; Stannard, 2008) and in Lacan's theory of the four discourses (Bracher *et al.*, 1994; Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1975, 1991). That metaphor provides us with insights and new meanings concerning the way organizations acquire power and exert influence on their surroundings.



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The importance of studying discourses in organizational settings, as well as the value of metaphors in such study is something already vigorously established in the literature (Andriessen and Gubbins, 2009; Bonet and Sauquet, 2010; Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2008; Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008; Czarniawska, 2003, 2004; Flory and Iglesias, 2010; Morgan, 1980, 1986; Putnam and Boys, 2006). Most studies so far, however, have focused in the content of discourses and also in discourses as tools for organizational power. Adopting a different view, Lacan has defined discourse as being a “social bond mediated by language” (Evans, 1996, p.44; Lacan, 1975, 1991). He has presented a theory of the discourse where it is understood as being a structure inside which endless variations of content can unfold. Besides, his theory also shows that discourse can be understood as something that acts as a supporting framework for power (Lacan, 1991, pp. 31-59). We can talk, for that reason, about discourse-as-content and discourse-as-structure. The Lacanian approach presented here adopts a higher level of abstraction than previous works about discourses in organizations, amplifying their scope without invalidating them.

I explore in this work mainly the discourse-as-structure. The metaphor of organizations as discursive gravitational fields allows for exploring the inner discursive core that frames organizations, also allowing for the construction of a discourse-based definition of organization that enlightens the connection between its birth and the actions of individuals in a society.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section I present the literature review. After that follows the description of the metaphor itself. The analysis of derived insights is then presented, followed by final remarks in the conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

In this review I will discuss relevant literature concerning two topics: organizational power in relation to stakeholder management and the connections between Lacan’s and Einstein’s works. Specific aspects of those thinkers’ theories will be discussed during the description of the metaphor itself.

### *2.1 Organizational power: an approach through stakeholder management*

The idea that organizations do not “end” at their building’s gates is on the basis of the concept of stakeholder. Originally developed by Freeman (1984), the strategic stakeholder management can be opposed to the shareholder approach to the firm, by shifting the focus of a company’s actions from the sole satisfactions (or at least to the taking into consideration) of shareholder’s desires to the well-being of an enlarged human environment, composed by all people significantly impacted by its activities. In its core, the theory can be located in the peculiar intersection between moral philosophy, in the sense of trying to answer the question of what is right and what is wrong (Slote, 1995a, pp. 591-2) and utilitarianism (Slote, 1995b, pp. 890-93), for its ultimate justification to the shifting from shareholder to stakeholder: organizational success. Stakeholder management “theory”, as originally proposed by Freeman, begins with a concern about the sustainability of the organization and only then establishes its ethical component, almost as a nice byproduct.

In order to do that, Freeman’s approach, as well as his follower’s, had relied deeply in the discursive aspects of the relation between organizations and its stakeholders, even if in a relatively unnoticed way. Harrison and St John (1996), for instance, have

collected tactics for “managing and partnering with external stakeholders”. Among those tactics, they have included “0800 numbers”, “enhanced communication linkages”, “joint information systems”, just to mention some tactics that explicitly deal with communication. All those tactics, however, implicitly call stakeholder management for what it is: an extension of organizational discourse, as a tool for increasing organization’s power beyond its walls, benignly or less benignly. In that sense, the whole concept of stakeholder management boils down to the management of organizational discursive interactions.

Kuhn (2008), extending the Montreal School of Organizational Communication’s concept of conversation-text relations, developed a communicative theory of the firm that connects intra-organizational power and external relationships. In his own words (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1228):

I depict firms as textual coorientation systems through which actors engage in “games” that serve a variety of purposes. Chief among these purposes for the constitution of the firm is that game playing both uses and attracts varying types of capital, which is won through the marshaling of consent.

It is interesting to notice that he has implicitly approached the “discursive attracting properties” of organizations, something important in the development of the metaphor present here. Kuhn’s theoretical extension of the Montreal School’s work provides the basis to the metaphor developed in this paper. Kuhn accepted the Montreal School’s assumptions about organizations as being a set of communicative coorientation systems, through which organizational actors “‘tune in’ to one another as they engage in interdependent activity” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1232). Those systems are constituted by conversation and texts:

For the Montreal School, organizations can be seen in two ways: either as a “macro-conversation” of interaction distributed across space and time, or as text writ large: a series of interrelated textual resources that comprise a “map” of the organizational territory (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1233).

Implicit in that assertion is the idea explored by Taylor *et al.* (1996) that organizations are constituted by communication, instead of the frequent assumption that communication is something that happens inside organizations. Kuhn also relies in Tsoukas’ (2003, p. 619) concept of organizations as devoid of any intrinsic structure, being only “discursive practices embedded within discursive practices”. He then moves to the concept of games in order to solve the problem of connecting texts to the practice and the production of value. Following Carse (1986), he admits the existence of finite and infinite games, the former “being played for the purpose of winning” and the latter “for the purpose of continuing the play”. Kuhn then presents the idea that for commercial firms the goal of an infinite game is “to attract capital”. Games, however, cannot proceed infinitely without what he has defined as being the willing participation (consent) of players.

Kuhn’s theory, however, fails in some central points: first, it relies too much in an intra- vs extra-organizational duality which is assumed without explanations about where the boundaries are supposed to be. That is a problem, since from a discursive standpoint, legal boundaries are very much useless to define the limits of an organization. Second, his theory does not explain the connection between individual action and the coming into being of organizations; it does not provide any explanation for the consent offered by actors which allows for the continuation of the discursive

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organizational games. That consent in his theory is a *Deus ex Machina* phenomenon. Moreover, Kuhn misses, or at least does not make it explicit, the relation between organizations and firms, which is one of species (firms) and genus (organizations). That happens even if he is able to provide the basis for the speciation of organizations, by pointing towards the different symbolic objects they aim to attract discursively, like profit, political power and so on. Kuhn, however, has failed to notice that capital can be understood as a form of discourse as well. The central weakness of his theory lies in the confusion between discourse-as-structure and discourse-as-content, something that can be understood through the lens of Lacanian theory of discourse.

The metaphor presented below, in spite of recognizing the importance of Kuhn's work in shaping a communicative theory of the organization that brings into question its essentially discursive nature, proposes a solution to those shortcomings.

### *2.2 Lacan's discourse theory and Einstein's theory of general relativity: finding a connection*

Einstein and Lacan are two very good candidates to be situated in the opposite endings of humankind's body of knowledge. The former was a physicist, utilizing mathematics as his working language and absorbed by the phenomena of nature; the latter was a physician (more specifically, a psychiatrist), to whom "language" was not only a working tool but also his object of study, alongside with the human being that to him is largely defined by his or her ability to utilize that very language. Einstein's work is exact and precise; Lacan's is obscure and fuzzy.

That opposition, however, does not resist closer scrutiny. Both of them have worked upon the discoveries of a past genius. Einstein has expanded the works of Newton; Lacan has also done the same to Freud's. But by doing so they created new bodies of knowledge, which share a common characteristic of describing non-intuitive phenomena that lie in the core of reality. Einstein described how gravity, space and time are interconnected in a network that builds up the physical reality; Lacan has described how language, metaphor, metonymy and desire are interconnected in a network that builds up the psychological reality.

Moreover, Lacan has also utilized in his work other appropriations from the exact sciences, for instance his algebra, an attempt to formalize psychoanalysis in a graphic and/or quasi-mathematical way (Evans, 1996, pp. 7-9) and also in his topology, "a non-intuitive, purely intellectual means of expressing the concept of structure" (Evans, 1996, p. 208), for instance representing the relation between demand and desire through the geometric figure of the torus (Nasio, 2010, p. 13). Both thinkers had developed theories of relativity. Einstein's is about the relativity of space and time; Lacan's is about the relativity of meaning. Einstein described the impossibility of a body travelling at the speed of light; Lacan has described the impossibility of fulfilling human desire. Einstein's gravity is the organizing factor in the physical universe while Lacan's language is the organizing factor of human experience. Bringing their works together, consequently, helps in the useful utilization of metaphor as a tool for theory-building, in the way previously described in Organization Theory (Cornelissen, 2006; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2005, 2008).

### **3. Metaphor description**

The metaphor presented here consists in the exploration of one insight: that organizations act upon their social surroundings in a way that is similar to the way massive bodies act

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on their physical surroundings. Both exert influence upon such surroundings and transform it in a very fundamental way. From that initial insight, a set of concepts is analogically adapted from physics in order to explore the derived insights. The most important of those concepts is the idea that the “force” responsible for both bringing organizations into being and for acting upon their surroundings is a symbolical equivalent of gravitation. I sustain here that such symbolic equivalent can only be discourse. So, “organizations as discursive gravitational fields” is a metaphor that aims at transferring insights from physics into organization studies. Relativity theory is an ideal starting point for its non-positivistic stance towards reality, something that can be seen in the non-intuitive way it deals with the space-time continuum.

The metaphor will be described in a logical (but not necessarily chronological sequence concerning related real-world phenomena) sequence of phases. Each phase represents a higher level of organizing. The single logical assumption needed to this description is the intellectual representation of the set of human discursive interactions as a social discursive field. That field is analogous to the Einsteinian space-time continuum in the sense of not-being an Euclidian (Einstein, 1993, pp. 94-6) concept: it is not a field in the sense of usual magnetic field, but one where space and time lose the ordinary boundaries. So, the discursive field may act more intensely over an individual or over an organization that is much further away geographically than over something that is much closer from that strict Euclidian standpoint. The discursive dimension is a symbolic one, and for that reason it can travel through history and through geographical and political boundaries as well.

In an ideal and perfectly democratic society, the field’s intensity would be the same at any of its points. That would happen because no discursive relation would be asymmetrical or would possess an *a priori* higher or lower power to influence human behavior. Such ideal field would present absolute relational homogeneity. We can represent that by saying it would possess a discursive Gini coefficient of 0 (total equality), applying to it that measure of statistical dispersion widely utilized in social sciences (Dagum, 1987). The metaphor describes the process by which such equality vanishes, as it can be observed in the real world. In a maximally undemocratic world, one single institution would amass all the discursive power, case in which the discursive Gini coefficient would be 1.

### *3.1 First phase: human discursive interaction*

Humans interact. Interaction presupposes and at the same time determines the very existence of communication. One would immediately think about discourse, considering the content of such communication. For Lacan, however, discourse is something that precedes any content, since discourse is a social bond mediated by language. Lacan’s theory of discourse tells us about discourse-as-structure, adding a new angle to the more usual debate about discourse-as-content.

For him, just a few basic discursive structures are possible, even if content can vary endlessly. Lacan has named such structures as the Master’s, the Hysteric’s, the University’s and the Analyst’s discourses (Lacan, 1991). The names should not be taken literally: any one of them, for instance, can be found inside a real world university. Lacan’s work has not developed “out of nothing”. Besides Freud, his theory is also related to other thinkers. Hegel, for instance, had already developed the idea of a Master-Slave bond (Singer, 1983, pp. 77-81). The Lacanian discursive structure

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explains what can be expected from each discourse. As an example, from the Master's discourse one could expect a struggle for domination, in which the Master tries to extract from the Slave a surplus. Lacan has explained how the initial "programming" of human psyche creates the discursive possibilities. He also shows that discursive absolutism is impossible, since something will always escape signification. That happens because the human ability to communicate is born out of a process of symbolic exclusion during the beginning of life. The whole signifying chain is organized around a fundamental lack, something that is irretrievably lost when a human being "falls" inside the realm of symbolization (and language).

Applying that primeval limitation to the Master, it is clear that in order to extract the surplus from the person or organization submissive to him, he must hide the fact that he is in its core also an incomplete being, discursively born from the same limitations in symbolization that have launched each human being in the world of language (Fink, 1995, 130-31). Such hiding creates the Achilles' heel that will eventually allow for new and emancipatory meaning to be created.

Being a framework, discourse can become the basis for a collective framework called organization. In this first phase, however, human interactions between two or more people can be just incidental to other interactions and can be very ephemeral. Even if repetitive, they do not persist in space or in time. This kind of interaction composes the larger part of discursive interactions to be found in daily life. Considering the above-mentioned ideal social discursive field, that kind of interaction does not alter its primeval homogeneity. Something else is necessary to change such state of affairs.

That initial phase, in other words, happens inside a human psychological framework that structures the discourse possibilities. Individuals interacting in daily life fill that framework with an endless set of possible content. But if there was nothing else happening in discursive interactions, no organization as we know would ever emerge, let alone with such variety as can be found in our reality. Something else is needed to bring permanence in time to discursive interactions. That "something" is explained by the concept of interpassivity.

### *3.2 Second phase: discursive agglutination caused by interpassive transference*

Some human interactions, however, will persist. In fact, they will become like seeds for the agglutination of other interactions. That happens because some discursive interactions bring together a sum of structure and content that will attract other people's discursive energy interpassively (Žižek, 1998). Supplementary to interactivity, interpassivity describes a situation where some figure of the Other is supposed to do something for us. The ultimate Lacanian Other is a symbolization of the entire social sphere, but is also something much beyond that, designating "radical alterity, an otherness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification" (Evans, 1996, p. 133). In the words of another author:

The Lacanian Great Other is exactly that agency that decides about things for which any planned decision would be self-destructive: it decides that we fall in love, it decides that someone arouses our respect (Salecl, 1994, p. 174).

Žižek (2008, p. xi) exemplifies the concept of interpassivity:

There are philosophical books, minor classics even, which are widely known and referred to, although practically no one has actually read them page by page – John Rawls's Theory of

Justice or Robert Brandom's Making it Explicit – a nice example of interpassivity, where some figure of the Other is supposed to do the reading for us.

By the same token, sometimes - very often indeed - we believe that a real or idealized group of people (the Lacanian Other), projected on a real discursive interaction among people, and not only the author of a book, is doing something for us.

That something can be protecting us, feeding, loving us, in fact it can be anything that fulfills a psychological need or the psychological aspect of a physical need. But I sustain that, in the end, it all boils down to the organization being powerful for us, in our place.

Paradoxically, that can only happen if I position myself, at least up to a point, as the submissive pole of such relation. When I interpassively accept a book as a source of knowledge without really having read it, I can only do that by positioning myself in the condition of ignorance in relation to the Other that has "read" it. When I accept that an organization-in-the-making can be powerful as a surrogate to my own powerlessness, that can only be possible if I accept my own submission to the Other that "exerts" that power. Because, in fact, it is exactly that cession of power that makes an organization powerful, as much as it is the fact that I consider the unread book authoritative that make it so. Here, there is transference of discursive surplus power-value to the organization-in-the-making.

There is a similarity here with the principal-agent relation, as described in the homonymous theory (Munro, 2008):

An agent is a person who is employed to do an act on behalf of another called the principal, so that as a rule the principal himself becomes bound. That one person can represent another is a doctrine that has developed but slowly [...] The modern principle is that contracts entered into by an agent are regarded as entered into by the principal, provided the contract is within the scope of the agent's authority.

The similarity lies in the idea of transference of power. But that similarity hides an essential difference: in the interpassive situation, one is not conscious of what is going on. It is a "symbolic contract" established discursively, while in the principal-agent relationship the contract is consciously signed. That unconsciousness, mediated by discursive symbols gives interpassivity its extraordinary strength and also its unpredictability. So, in the interpassive relation, the passive principal is the one who will act in the place of the patient, the one that psychologically transfers his or her powers. And, even more interestingly, here the patient is the one who becomes bound to the passive principal. It only takes to think about people that die in wars waged by repressive dictators, even if their lives were destroyed by that same dictator. Often they justify that by "love of the Motherland". In such example, the ones dying are the patients and "the Motherland" is the passive principal".

We could re-write Munro's sentence accordingly:

*A passive principal* is a person [*or entity*] who is *interpassively* employed to do an act on behalf of another called the *patient*, so that as a rule the *patient* himself becomes bound. That one person can be represented by another [*person or entity*] is a phenomenon that has developed but slowly *through the evolution of discursive interactions in nature*. [...] The modern principle is that *discursive contracts* entered into by a *patient* are regarded as entered into by the *passive principal*, provided the contract is *beyond* the scope of the patient's authority.

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Because of interpassivity, even after the physical interaction among people is over, the psychological is not. It will “capture” at least part of the “discursive energy” of that individual, and we can even expect some concrete expression, for instance through the incorporation of subjects, words and opinions to one’s discourse. From that moment on, discourse no longer vanishes after physical interaction is over, because interpassivity allows for the persistence of discourse in a symbolic discursive space. That explains why interpassive interactions will persist even after the involved people and entities are no longer together. But again, something is still lacking, if we want to explain why organizations can keep existing even if all its original members have vanished. We need therefore the concept of discursive transitivity.

### *3.3. Third phase: discursive transitivity and the birth of organization*

Even persisting in discursive space, the initial agglutination is still not able to persist in discursive time, for it still cannot survive the changing of its original members. But organizations also do persist in time. The psychological phenomenon that allows for that happening is the phenomenon of symbolic transference, which implies in a transitivity of the original seed interaction forwards in time. In other words, that is the phenomenon responsible for keeping discursive interaction alive from generation to generation. It is also the reason why an institution like the Roman Catholic Church can claim to be same institution of one thousand years ago, even if all its members are different and even if the activities and policies have changed: its members accepted that fact through a process of symbolic transference. Going back to our metaphor, it is equivalent to the interchangeability of time and space in physics. Here, the equivalence is between the process of interpassivity and transitivity of symbolic power. In the first case, the origin of everything is a physical fundamental interaction between bodies that is called “gravitation”. In the second, a social one between humans that is called “discourse”.

### *3.4. Fourth phase: discursive gravitational expansion*

But until now, such metaphor does not explain how and why organization determines an impact on the surrounding discursive environment as a whole, beyond its own borders. That happens for a third step in the process: the organization, having acquired a critical amount of discursive mass will start to exert attraction also on surrounding discursive interactions, even without any transference of symbolic content, because at this point the organization will have acquired discursive mass, which determines a discursive gravitational pull which does not allow surrounding interactions to ignore the organization. Surrounding discourses become satellited to that organization. The signs of such phenomenon are the fact that the organization: changes surrounding discourses’ content (narrative distortion); changes meanings (rhetoric distortion); and also changes values, by “naturalizing” whatever helps it to grow (ethical distortion). We can illustrate such changes from the dramatic changes determined upon German society by the Nazi party, especially after its rise to power in 1933:

- Narrative distortion – Klemperer (2006) describes in his work how language itself was transformed by the Nazi rise to power in Germany. Even punctuation (Klemperer, 2006, pp. 67-9) was changed, for example by the over-utilization of ironic inverted commas.



- Rhetoric distortion creates new meaning because of the influence of organizations. A dramatic example comes from ethnic slurs always utilized as a way of de-humanizing the people aimed at becoming targets in a genocide or ethnic cleansing program. A dramatic example provided by Klemperer (2006, p. 139) when he describes “how a female warder in Belsen concentration camp explains to the war crimes trial that on such and such day she dealt with 16 *Stück Gefangenen* (“pieces” of prisoners).
- Finally, ethical distortion can be exemplified by the changing values of German society after the coming to power of Nazis in 1933. Klemperer (2006, pp. 37-9) describes the ethical transformation of a young German student that had been invited to live with him and his wife. The youngster was treated by them almost as an adopted son (in fact calling Klemperer and his wife “Dad” and Mom”) and from a struggling, hard-worker student he morphed into a criminal capable of physically abusing “communists”, justifying the act as being “just a punitive expedition” (*Strafexpedition*).

### 3.5. Fifth phase: discursive black holes

As discursive agglutination keeps growing, an organization crosses a threshold that can be called “organizational discursive singularity”: the organization becomes a “black hole” from where no discourse can escape. In the real world, it corresponds to the appearance of a “total organization” characterized by: radical changes in discourses’ content, corresponding to the imposition of “prescribed narratives”; a radical change of meaning, corresponding to the utilization of “rhetoric as truth”; and, finally, a radical shift of values, since from this point on, this *überorganization* will have naturalized the organization’s “right” for a perceived social *lebensraum*, leading to an empty ethics characterized by its non-communicability, in the sense it that forecloses real communication about values.

This phase can be understood as being an exacerbation of the previous one. Social and organizational “dictatorships” will try to create such situation Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples can be extracted from the last words of Orwell’s *1984*:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother (Orwell, 2011).

The total organization pervades every “space” of life. No longer able to overcome the discursive pull, individuals but reproduce the official discourse.

## 4. Implications of derived insights

The metaphor suggests a number of valuable insights, which will be described here. Only main ideas and implications are outlined, but further research can deepen the derived knowledge.

### 4.1 The distortion of discursive surroundings by organizations

By acquiring more and more discursive mass, organizations develop such strong “discursive gravitational pull” that it will deform the surrounding discursive field. That

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has important consequences for stakeholder management. The implication here is that no stakeholder is discursively neutral to the organization. That very capture is the most important effect of organizational power, and it neutralizes the power of most discourses that oppose the growth of the organization. Here, one cannot help but remember the idea of a “language of total administration” as presented by Marcuse (1991, p. 92):

Thus, the fact that the prevailing mode of freedom is servitude, and that the prevailing mode of equality is superimposed inequality is barred from expression by the closed definition of these concepts in terms of the powers which shape the respective universe of discourse.

Macey (2000, p. 328), remembers that in advanced industrial societies, “repressive desublimation, the culture industry and the tyranny of public opinion combine to create a mentality in which all values are predetermined to the extent that they are vital to the workings of the economy”. That pre-determination is a good example of how a sufficiently strong discursive gravitational field can capture even discourses that superficially seem to be emancipatory.

#### *4.2 The boundaries of organizations as a gradient of discursive gravitational pull: degrees of “stakeholding”*

The metaphor also brings implications for the concept of organizational boundaries. Far from being something that can be precisely pointed in the social field, organizations possess no sharply defined boundaries, since the discursive gravitational pull of an organization fades away gradually in the social discursive field. What a legal statute does is just, in that sense, to establish a fiction that does not correspond to any discursive boundary of the organization. Organizations are essentially agglutinations of discourses inside the social field plus the gradient of discursive gravitational pull surrounding them.

An implication is that, caught in the symbolic net, individual stakeholders can be more or less submitted to the discursive pull but rarely neutral. That implies a discursive gradation of stakeholding.

#### *4.3 Organizational discursive interference and the superposition of organizations*

But since we have more than one single organization in a society, another phenomenon that we can verify is the existence of a superposition of organizations’ gravitational fields, leading to two basic phenomena: resonance and interference. The first will happen when one discourse becomes dominant, leading to the absorption of the other discourse into the first organization’s orbit, making it proportionally stronger and the second happens when organizations fields clash without one clearly predominating over the other.

An individual caught in such clash can manage to not fall into any of the organizations’ field, since the pulls can annihilate each other. That is the basis for the co-existence of both organizations and democratic societies. In a democratic society, the State and/or the Civil Society’s organizations’ gravitational pull will be sufficiently strong to counter-act any individual organization’s gravitational pull.

It also makes clear how delicate is the balance between organizational power and democracy, and how the existence of multiple discourses helps democracy. Recent events involving social networks in unusual social settings like the Arab Spring movement suggest there is a possibility for a technology-led amplification of discursive fields but further research is needed in order to better understand the phenomenon.

#### *4.4 The discursive speciation of organizations*

The metaphor also provides a way to understand how organizations “speciate”, by showing how they become different among themselves. From a symbolic standpoint, organizations will differ accordingly to what basic symbolic outcomes they manage to extract from the surrounding social fields. As explained before, when a person or a group of people becomes attracted to an organization in a process of interpassive transference, there is also transference of social power involved, which is the basis to the acquired power by the ever-growing organization, in a process of accumulation of surplus discursive value.

That surplus will be expressed in a tendency to acquire more of a specific kind of value, established as such by a pre-established set of symbols. So, for instance, the “firm” as defined by Kuhn, will accumulate profit, therefore it can be said that it aims to be recognized as “profitable”. A governmental agency will try to acquire “political approval” and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will try to acquire “social modification”. That approach unveils the fact that accumulation of power is in the basis of all organization-stakeholder relation, since behind those outcomes searched for lies the tendency of organizations to keep trying to acquire more and more discursive mass.

#### *4.5 Discursive gravitational field and organizational change*

Understood as discursive gravitational fields, organizations acquire the condition of ever-changing set of relations. For that reason, one can no longer ask about the existence of organizational change but only about the degree of organizational change. That brings the interesting insight that “organizational change” is necessarily about discursive change. The metaphor suggests that in order to change an organizational setting, it takes to change narratives, meanings and, finally, ethical behaviors. Such connection has been explored by Ford (1999, p. 484), especially when he notices that “although conversations are themselves explicit utterances, much of the way in which they support the apparent continuity of a reality is implicit, by virtue of a network of background conversations”. The discursive gravitational field can be understood as the “invisible prompter” which defines the content of such network.

#### *4.6 The quantum nature of the organization-individual relationship: the space-time for freedom*

A final insight extract from the model is the “irreducible space-time of freedom”. Even if we have to move a little bit beyond Einstein and towards quantum physics (Liddle and Loveday, 2008, pp. 241-2), a new understanding can be provided for the role of individual action. One could predict from the model that individuals are powerless against organizations, except in the described case of reciprocal interference. That conclusion, however, would be against Lacan’s explanation given to the Master’s discourse: since human ability to communicate was based in a loss of the primordial “complete symbolization”, no complete and permanent discursive extraction is possible in a human relation. In other words, absolute power forever is impossible.

That can be brought into the model by making the creation of meaning a quantum phenomenon: sometimes, new meanings will be created from nothing. Žižek (1992, pp. 8-12), working inside a Lacanian framework, gives us a very interesting example of that by analyzing Shakespeare’s lines in *Richard II*, which describe the dialogue

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between the suffering Queen and Bushy, the King's servant. The servant tries to explain to her that most of her sorrows derive from "looking awry" to reality, finding imaginary evils. But Žižek sustains that in fact such act is the one that allows us to extract "meaning from nothing". "Looking awry" is always possible and can lead to the creation of new meaning "from nothing". The interpassive transference that has locked an individual in an asymmetrical relation with an organization will be challenged once in a while, creating the opportunity for emancipatory discourse.

Each one of those insights can be further explored in field research, especially in settings where major organizational changes have occurred, like in post-merger and post-acquisition situations.

## 5. Conclusion

The metaphor presented in this article offers a number of insights and new meanings in a way that can be further explored. Its fundamental characteristic is the building of a connection between the pre-organizational individual and the appearance of organizations. Also, it relates organizational power to an individual act of interpassive cession of his or her power to it. All those aspects can be further developed in connection to more specific phenomena of organizational life.

Moreover, the metaphor makes it clear the importance of the relationship between individual freedom and organizational power, and presents a way to understand the function of Civil Society and State in a society that aims to have organizations that really empower their citizens.

A number of insights were derived from the metaphor. The first one is that organizations can distort their discursive surroundings up to the point of stopping any flux of independent discourse. The second refers to the way that boundaries of organizations are to be understood as a gradient of discursive influence which fades away, often much beyond its legal limits; that also creates degrees of "stakeholding", corresponding to different levels of dependence on a specific organization by their stakeholders. The third derived insight is the idea that discursive fields of different organizations are often superposed, creating the phenomena of interference and superposition among organizational discursive fields. The fourth derived insight suggests that speciation among organizations is related to the kind of symbolic element attracted predominantly by their surrounding fields. Finally, Lacanian theory suggests that no absolute and permanent discursive power is possible to persons or organizations, leaving room to the continuous production of new and potentially emancipating meaning, whose appearance, however, can be very difficult to predict due to its "discursive quantum nature".

The metaphor of organizations as discursive gravitational fields also can be explored to better understand the moral duality of organizations. As presented in the description of the metaphor, they can be understood as being agglutinations of discourses in a previously homogeneous social discursive field. Therefore, they add to the total enthalpy of the discursive system, by creating inequalities. Those inequalities determine the distortion of surrounding discourses, which causes the appearance of new meanings and new rhetorical possibilities. New rhetorical possibilities have been described by McCloskey (2010) as being an essential element of social development. However, new meanings and new rhetorical possibilities have also been described by Klemperer (2006) as a tool of totalitarianism. Between those opposed poles of

innovation and violation, lies the whole set of organizational-related phenomena, and exploring further the metaphor of organizations as gravitational fields can help us to better understand the mechanism that makes organizations position themselves closer to one of those poles.

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