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Secret Agencies: The Communicative Constitution of a Clandestine Organization

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Abstract
This special issue challenges scholars to consider the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of viewing organizations as ‘constituted in and through human communication.’ Interrogating the work of one of the most influential approaches to the study of the constitutive nature of organizing, the oeuvre of James Taylor and his colleagues or what has become known as the Montreal School, we identify an implicit assumption of organizational transparency. We suggest that unpacking ‘the transparency principle’ helps build a richer framework that builds upon the foundations of the Montreal School, facilitates empirical inquiry, and highlights several aspects of the social context which are typically taken for granted within organizational studies. Expanding Taylor et al.’s orientation to clandestine organizations, we address the question posed by the editors in the call for papers: ‘How does a communication-as-constitutive of organization’s perspective shape understandings of the organization’s embeddedness in social contexts?’ Clandestine organizations embody secret agency and intriguing possibilities for understanding the ways in which social actors communicatively constitute organizations. The metaconversations of clandestine organizing take place in a complex socio-political historical context, and exploration of these metaconversations not only furthers our understanding of illicit and clandestine systems but also provides new insights into the communicative constitution of contemporary organizations in general.

Keywords
al Qaeda, clandestine organizations, communicative constitution of organizations, Montreal school, transparency

Introduction
This special issue challenges scholars to consider the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of viewing organizations as ‘constituted in and through human communication.’ The
Editors note that there are several versions of this perspective and each contributes to our understanding of the processes by which organizations are established, designed, and sustained. Interrogating the work of one of the most influential approaches to the study of the constitutive nature of organizing, the oeuvre of James Taylor and his colleagues or what has become known as the Montreal School, we identify an implicit assumption of organizational transparency within the approach. The assumption of transparency, we argue, results in under-theorizing two concepts central to understanding the communicative constitution of organizations: legitimacy and voice. We suggest that unpacking ‘the transparency principle’ helps construct a richer framework that builds upon the foundations of the Montreal school and facilitates empirical inquiry into all types of organizations by highlighting several aspects of the social context which are typically taken for granted, yet which are a significant part of the communicative constitution of organizations.

Specifically, expanding Taylor et al.’s orientation to the study of clandestine organizing enables us to address a provocative question posed by the editors in the call for papers: ‘How does a communication-as-constitutive of organization’s perspective shape understandings of the organization’s embeddedness in social contexts?’ Clandestine organizations embody secret agency and intriguing possibilities for understanding the ways in which social actors embed themselves in the social context and thereby communicatively constitute organizations. The metaconversations of clandestine organizing take place in a very different social context than other organizational conversations, and exploration of these metaconversations not only furthers our understanding of illicit and clandestine systems but also provides new insights into the communicative constitution of contemporary organizations in general.

**Constituting Clandestine Organizations**

It will come as no surprise, given our own research interests in terrorist organizing, that as we have read, studied, and admired Taylor and his colleagues’ work, we were struck by the transparencies of the organizations they have studied and the absence of consideration of illicit and clandestine organizations. Yet, many types of covert organizations have become iconic representations of organizational transformation in the 21st century. Naim (2006) persuasively argues that the illusions we have about global illicit trade (and the organizations which conduct it) – (1) it is nothing new, (2) it is just about crime, and (3) it is underground – are rooted in serious miscalculations about the magnitude, pervasiveness, and significance of organizational changes wrought by new technologies and the dynamics of globalization.

It is the same mutation as that of international terrorist organizations like al Qaeda or Islamic Jihad – or for that matter, of activists for the global good like the environmental movement or the World Social Forum. All have moved away from fixed hierarchies and toward decentralized networks, away from controlling leaders and toward multiple, loosely linked, dispersed agents and cells: away from rigid lines of control and exchange toward constantly shifting transactions as opportunities dictate.

Across disciplines, clandestine organizations have been variously described as underground organizations (Varon, 2004), covert networks (Carley, 2006) dark networks (Arguilla & Ronfelt, 2000), illicit networks (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Jones, 2008), secret societies (Simmel, 1906), enclaves (Squires, 2002), and shadow states (Reno, 1995). They are typically characterized as a collection of individual cells united by a secret network of internal communication or what some call an invisible network. Although in recent years there has been greater emphasis on the loosely coupled nature of clandestine organizing, historical and contemporary studies of gangs (Egley & O’Donnell, 2009; Thrasher, 1963), organized crime syndicates (Kumar & Skaperdas, 2009), and
terrorists groups such as the Irish Republican Army (Horgan & Taylor, 1997) indicate clandestine networks can range from being hierarchical and highly structured to horizontal, flexible and fluidly structured.

We define clandestine organizations as having three necessary and sufficient characteristics. These characteristics insure a level of concealment not associated with other types of organizations. (1) Members mutually agree upon keeping their own and others affiliations secret (for at least some period of time). (2) The internal activities and collective governance structures operate furtively, outside the public realm. (3) External traces of the existence of the organization eventually become known (or at least rumored) outside the membership (although the organization may be completely unknown outside its own membership for long periods of time).

All other organizing processes may be variable. The clandestine organization may be completely autonomous or part of another organization which itself is legitimate and operates within the public realm (e.g. the Knights Templar). Moreover, clandestine organizations are not necessarily illegal or illicit (e.g. Skull and Bones at Yale). However, even when they are legal, some of their activities and even their overall mission may be illegal (as in the case of some CIA covert actions). Conversely, clandestine organizations may operate outside a legal framework but may engage in legitimate activities (legal entities such as restaurants and night clubs owned by the Mafia and other criminal organizations). And in both licit and illicit situations, where the activities are legal, organizations may remain clandestine to protect their members and modes of operation from public scrutiny in order to maintain freedom of action, shroud interorganizational connectivity, and/or increase organizational effectiveness.

Clandestine organizations also vary in the degree to which they are known and acknowledged. They may be part of a well-known resistance movement (e.g. the Franc Tireurs et Partisans in France during WWII), a well-established political or religious group (e.g. the outlawed Communist Party in Brazil in the 1920’s, the Masons), or the infamous criminal underworld (e.g. the Mafia). On the other hand, their existence may be completely unknown or known only to a small circle outside the membership until the clandestine group publicly claims responsibility for an event (e.g. the Decaan Mujahideen was unknown until the Mumbai bombings in 2008). Clandestine organizations may engage in adversarial relations with the state and the powers that be (e.g. the Irish Republican Army, Hamas) or work in concert with the state (e.g. death squads in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile). Clandestine organizations may exist to maintain and/or defend the status quo (e.g. the Ku Klux Klan) as well as weaken and/or destroy it (al Qaeda).

Thus we see that clandestine organizations are not bound by any particular ideological, structural, institutional, or sectoral distinctions. Rather, clandestine organizations, whether operating in the university, the church, the government, the criminal underworld, the local community or global society, all face a common and unique set of opportunities and constraints that distinguish them from their transparent counterparts. Ironically, the distinct communicative foundations of clandestine organizing, we suggest, pose the greatest theoretical challenges for studying and viewing organizations as communicatively constituted.

Moreover, when it comes to clandestine organizations that engage in terrorist acts, the communicative context becomes even more complex and theoretically more challenging. Terrorism itself is communicatively constituted violence, and as such it is both the cognitive symbolization of organizational intention and a pragmatic utterance. Terrorists (as individuals or organizations) seek through their acts of violence (whether perpetrated or threatened) to create fear and/or compliant behavior in a victim and/or an audience for the act or threat. While there is a long debate, both scholarly and political, concerning the appropriate definition of terrorism, violence, fear, intent, victim, and audience are always at the core.
Stohl (1983) defines terrorism as the *purposeful* act or the threat of the act of *violence* to create *fear* and/or compliant behavior in a *victim* and/or *audience* of the act or threat. This communicatively constituted violence is meant to send a message (i.e. begin or continue a conversation) with multiple audiences – those it opposes, those it supports, and those it would like to see support it. The message to those it opposes is at its most basic: ‘We exist, we are your enemy, and we can and will attack you until our demands are met.’ To those it purports to support the core message is ‘We will strike our common enemy on your behalf and do them harm until our common goals are achieved.’ Terrorist acts, then, in the terms of Taylor and his colleagues, are material manifestations of representation, constituting the organization as a single actor; they function both as text, as they represent collective intention, and voice, as they enunciate the intention (Taylor, 2000). It is in this conversational context that multiple voices, both within and outside the organization of terrorists, seek to establish the organizational rationales, structures, and boundaries and hence communicatively construct the clandestine organization. And as the meanings of these texts are contested, the socio/cultural/political/historical context is transformed and the clandestine organization is simultaneously both better understood and more opaque to both organizational insiders and outsiders.

It is within this context that we believe conceptualizing the communicative constitution of clandestine organizations such as al Qaeda requires an elaboration of the Montreal’s School theoretical framework. This refinement will not only provide both theoretical and practical insights for this special case of organizing but organizing in general. Analyses of organizations intentionally shrouded and opaque bring to the fore taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of organizing that are rarely addressed in our accounts of conventional organizations. In the next section we provide a brief articulation of the Montreal School before addressing the transparency principle and unpacking the theoretical and pragmatic significance of the associated embedded assumptions.

**The Montreal School**

James Taylor and his colleagues at the University of Montreal have played a pivotal role in establishing the idea that communication is constitutive of organizations and their relations with the environments (e.g. Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). For more than a decade, they have argued that there are various agents involved in the communicative constitution of organization. As with every powerful theoretical framework, the perspective has been refined and elaborated over the years. At its core, for Taylor et al., conversation represents the ‘communicative activities of agents,’ and the ways in which organizational problems are formulated, presented, and made sense of. Framed within a material social environment, conversation is the site where organizing occurs and where agency and text are generated. Building upon, as well as grounding conversations, texts are discursively based interpretations defining agents, purposes, and organizations. Texts ‘refer to the language environment that frames conversations and reflects the sense-making practices and habits of interpretation of organization members dealing with their immediate material/social purposes’ (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004, p. 395).

Elaborating this work, Cooren and colleagues posit that various types of agencies (human, textual, other non-humans) involved in the communicative constitution of organization influence the ways in which problems are formulated, presented, and understood. They conceptualize problem formulation as ‘a process of human actors selecting an agent in a chain of agencies’ (Castor & Cooren, 2006, p. 579) and suggest that recognizing the role of non-human agents in the process provides a more comprehensive picture of organizational action and the construction of organizational realities.

One of the greatest strengths of this body of work is the careful and detailed analysis of actual organizational discourses, conversations, and texts. Their data provide rich and nuanced exemplars...
of the theoretical power of the framework they have developed. Large discursive data sets come from a diverse set of organizations and communities of practice including a corporate executive group addressing issues of CEO succession (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004; Cooren, 2007), a case study of faculty senate meetings at a ‘Western University’ (Castor and Cooren, 2006), a real estate agency in Manhattan, board meetings of public and private organizations, and public meetings of city administrators and citizens (Robichaud, Girous, & Taylor, 2004). In all cases, Taylor and his colleagues provide insightful analyses of ‘metaconversation,’ what they describe as ‘the recursive property of language as a key to organizing’ (Robichaud et al., 2004). They argue that ‘the constitution of organization occurs in a metaconversation.’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 624).

There are two central components to the overall argument. The first, that organizations are language-based and constituted by multiple voices, cognitive domains, and communities of practice, is fairly uncontroversial in this millennium. The second, that organizations emerge ‘from the recursive processes of the conversations of the members [emphasis not in the original], where each conversation narratively frames, explicitly or implicitly, the previous one’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 264) is a far more provocative claim in the 21st century, a century which began with the literal explosion of a clandestine organization into the consciousness and conversation of people across the globe.

In light of the fact that Taylor (2000) convincingly has argued that the role of conversation is ‘to make sense of the circumstances in which organizational members find themselves…’ and ‘to transform those members from a collection of individuals into a collective actor,’ the question arises, how do we approach conversations, texts, and metaconversations when membership is opaque? For example, al Qaeda, the organization, claimed responsibility for the attacks of 11 September 2001. Al Qaeda, the organization, has been blamed for many other horrific acts leading to the loss of thousands of additional lives. The presumptive link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, the organization, was one of the three foundational arguments that the Bush administration made for going to war in Iraq. The existence of the organization al Qaeda in Iraq became a cornerstone for arguments for the United States not withdrawing from Iraq. Yet, notwithstanding the multiple conversations, the texts, and metaconversations, we do not know who the members are, what the organization is, or whether actors who claim they are in the organization actually work together collectively. In other words, the communicative and material constitution of al Qaeda, the organization, remains an enigma.

As typically conceived, the metaconversation which ‘creates entities that did not exist by closing the black boxes of previous conversations that sustained them’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 630) is far less likely to occur in the relations between clandestine organizations and other communities of practice. The limits imposed by the adoption of concealment, silence, and secret agency not only offer fewer clues to those observing the organization but also create greater ambiguity in conversations, texts, and metatexts within and outside the organizational membership. The ‘implicit canonical script made of social and institutional rules and contracts’ that is theoretically negotiated in context is not tracked in the same manner as it is in traditional organizations and so we might expect that the so called black box never closes. The successive embedding of one text and its context of enunciation within another – the principle of ‘imbrication’ – that produces a stable but ever changing environment is far less likely when the degrees of openness and transparency are seriously compromised. Thus, the grounds for discursive closure and the co-orientation of community identity are minimized when voices are hidden, misdirected, or systematically isolated. In other words, the self conscious and self reflexive secrecy of clandestine organizations creates a context in which metaconversations will take different forms than those that have been typically considered or deemed important.
On first blush, it may seem that our argument relies solely upon a methodological issue rather than the need for theoretical elaboration. The methodological argument goes like this: in clandestine organizations, conversations and texts of organizing are hidden and not accessible to the public. Therefore it is impossible to study organizations from a perspective that theoretically and empirically relies on the study of conversation, texts, and interaction. Obviously, it is the case that clandestine organizations are notoriously difficult to study because of the lack of archival information, interviews, observations, and other forms of researcher access, but those types of problems can potentially be overcome, particularly with the passage of time and the uncovering of text and conversations. Indeed, there have been studies of several clandestine organizations using archival documents and original source materials (see Cragin, 2008 for a description of historical case studies). Cragin herself utilized al Qaeda letters and internal records that were obtained in 2001 and 2002 by the US military in Afghanistan. Corman (2006), using captured documents that have been made public (al Qaeda Terrorist Manual) as well as several published accounts of al Qaeda operations, developed a simulation model of activity focused networks for designing counterterrorism measures.

Our argument is based upon the need to address the constitution of covert organizing by focusing upon the foundational principles of secrecy and concealment embedded within clandestine organization. These conditions clearly affect the ways in which the organization is constituted for members and non-members alike, as internal as well as external interactions are constrained. To do so we first identify the theoretical assumption of transparency within the Montreal school. We then argue that this assumption of transparency has within it further assumptions regarding the ontology of organizations, organizational membership, voice, and legitimacy that need further attention to fully comprehend secret agency. This is not to say that the Montreal School is inappropriate for the study of clandestine organizations; indeed we are intrigued by its possibilities. Rather, by embracing the Montreal school’s perspective and exploring the extreme case of clandestine terrorist organizations, features of all organizing contexts that are typically considered backdrop and hence unremarkable are reconfigured as foreground and central to the emerging constitutive metaconversations. The veil of secrecy forces us to see and locate the constitutive processes of organization in the sociocultural, historically grounded, economic, institutional, and political context that is embellished, but not solely produced, through local communicative processes. We believe this is a fruitful approach when studying all organizations regardless of the level of opaqueness or relative transparency.

The Embedded Transparency Principle

Somewhat ironically and despite its theoretical fluidity, dynamism, and multivocality, embedded within the Montreal School is a subtle but significant view of organization as a transparent, formal, evolving system that is knowable, through conversations across multiple, overt communities of practice. Taylor and colleagues presuppose the materiality of roles, contracts, and institutional strictures and structures that are an essential part of conversation and text. Organizational members are identified, relationships are governed by institutional and organizational specific norms, and there is some level of agreement (contractual foundation) upon which the organizational members operate. Organizing is achieved through co-orientation, as organizational members simultaneously orient themselves to shared objects of concern and to each other. We suggest that although the theoretical language and approach diverge from traditional ways of talking about and viewing organizations, there is a consistent and implicit assumption of organizational transparency rooted within the theory.

We quote at length Robichaud et al.’s rationale for their proposition that ‘the constitution of organization occurs in metaconversation’ to illustrate the strong traces of the transparency assumption typically associated with systems of explicit rules, known status structures, and overt communication processing.
The quasi-contractual understandings that establish the fundamental coorientational relationships that form the basis of the organization, as a moral entity, are what we call the ‘basic communicational and narrative constitution’ of the organization. The constitution, though it may be unwritten, governs relationships among the officers of the organization, its sponsors, its employees, its clients, and the governmental institutions of the society in which it is located. Such a constitution is not built from scratch but draws on a number of narrative institutions, of which ‘modern organization’ is typically a significant one, although not the only one (Czarniawska, 1997). As long as there is no breach of the contractual foundation on which the existence of the organization is premised, ordinary communication reduces to routine – it becomes ‘imbricated’ (Taylor, 2001). Only when the implicit constitution is breached does it become evident how dependent organizations may be on it for their very existence – a dependence illustrated by the fate, historically, of even the greatest of organizations when they betrayed the trust that was confided in them. (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 624)

When Robichaud et al. suggest that during an open forum ‘the mayor is doing a lot more than adjusting his discourse to the expressed preferences of his audience; through the metaconversation, he reconstructs, along with the citizens, the city as an organization’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 630), the analysis is based on a priori knowledge of the significant and legitimate roles of city administration and citizen. In addition, those conversations are available to each participant and interpretive differences as well as challenges to basic organizational foundations are knowable and discussable. The political nature of the organization, status differences, and other contextual features may make the conversation difficult, but it is theoretically possible. This is simply not the case in clandestine organizations which constitute themselves by divorcing their most basic discussions from the communities within which their conversation is occurring. Unlike Robichaud’s example, the clandestine organization needs to do much more than adjust its discourse to the expressed preferences of the community. For example, while al Qaeda ‘puts out inspirational guidance on the Internet’ (Sageman, 2008, p. 132), it not only ‘does not have the means to exert command and control’ over what Sageman refers to as the potential like-minded audience, the constraints of secrecy preclude the opportunity to engage in the types of reciprocal conversations that would allow the organization and that audience to openly and mutually constitute that organization. The possibilities for locally constructed imbrication are foreclosed.

In other words, in the case of clandestine organizations, ontological status is challenged in fundamentally different ways than when transparency is operative. From the moment al Qaeda entered our global consciousness on 11 September 2001, the 19 men who hijacked four planes and flew two of them into the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon, and one which crashed into a field in Pennsylvania were linked to a clandestine organization that was present in its discursive absence. In the days following the attack, Osama Bin Laden was linked to the hijackers and then he and the organization he headed, al Qaeda, were identified as the organizers of the attack. In subsequent days al Qaeda was described as a network (Risen and Van Natta, NYT, 14 September 2001), as an ‘umbrella organization for jihad groups in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, the Philippines, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Chechnya and Kashmir’ (Miller, Weiser, & Blumenthal, NYT, 16 September 2001), and as ‘the group that Mr. bin Laden, a Saudi-born multimillionaire, founded in Afghanistan 13 years ago to wage holy war throughout the world’ (Golden & Miller, NYT, 18 September 2001). However, as we write, more than nine years after the attacks of September 11, it is still evident that there is a lack of agreement as to the organizational dimensions of al Qaeda and thus it is very relevant to ask the most basic of organizational questions, that is, ‘What is al Qaeda, the organization?’

The 9/11 report, as well as most other sources, claim that the organization was probably formally organized in 1988 with perhaps a dozen members and that in its origins the organization appears to have had a traditional hierarchical structure with Osama bin Laden as its head and with
its members swearing fealty to him personally. But unlike transparent organizations, there are no quasi-contractual understandings that establish the fundamental co-orientational relationships that form the basis of the organization. For example, in the face of competing interpretations of Wal-Mart (variously described as an MNC that is (a) exploiting workers, (b) ruining communities, (c) bringing good value to customers, or (d) creating new and more efficient organizational models and supply chains), there is agreement that Wal-Mart is a large hierarchically structured retail store that sells products (as well as other things). Likewise, whether one is a democrat, republican, libertarian, liberal, conservative, or is simply apathetic, there is agreement that a city government is a bureaucracy that engages citizens as it carries out its governance role; and while some may disagree about tactics, goals, etc. all may agree that Greenpeace is a non-governmental volunteer organization whose focus is the environment. But there is no such consensual co-orientation with al Qaeda. While we may agree that an organization we call al Qaeda engages in terrorism, the actual organization itself is in dispute. The conditions of secrecy insure that the constitutive texts, conversation, and metacommunication cannot be primarily rooted in local mutual interaction but in macro historical, institutional and political processes. For clandestine organizations, particularly those that use terror, external observers often construct their own organizational ‘reality’ based on their own positions, history, and understanding of the context. This understanding, in turn, shapes their responses, which then reinforces their construction. Miles Kahler (2006, p. 4–5) concluded,

As Jonathan Raban recently complained, ‘the name al-Qaeda means something different practically every time it’s used.’ … Jason Burke claims that Osama bin Laden and his partners ‘never created a coherent terrorist network in the way commonly conceived,’ instead adopting a model that was much more like a ‘venture capital firm.’ Olivier Roy tags it as ‘an organization and a trademark.’ Marc Sageman portrays al Qaeda as part of a ‘global Salafi jihad,’ which is ‘not a specific organization, but a social movement.’

Here we can see that the complex, opaque interactional field of clandestine organizations makes it unlikely that ‘imbrication’ will occur. The grounds for discursive closure and the co-orientation of community identity must be derived outside the local context. Communities of practice, unable to jointly negotiate the new entities, rely upon previously constructed visions of organizations and overlay them on to the current moment. Because these ‘hidden’ voices are often discussed along with those representing wider movements and discussions of ideas and resentments, they are often considered to be of the same ‘organization’ when they have chosen, as we have indicated above, to close their organizational conversation by secreting themselves from the wider discussion. While Bin Laden and Zawahiri’s al Qaeda may engage the wider community through their acts of violence and statements of intent, this should not imply that the wider community of supporters or would be members has been engaged in their organizational discourse or strategic planning. Bin Laden may thus provide the simple ‘script’ (Taylor, 2008) for others to follow, but the existence of the script does not disclose the particulars of the materiality of the organization. As Sageman argues,

Each local group lives in its own world, connected to the overall social movement through the Internet. Their attempts are all ad hoc, each with its own internal logic and directed against its own local targets. Commentators and journalists are quick to image an overall coordination and conspiracy to these events but no central coordinator, whether part of al Qaeda Central or not, had been found or even suggested in the vast majority of terrorist operations. (Sageman, 2008, p. 145)

Indeed, one of the consequences of this confusion and the resultant attempts by organizational theorists, pundits, journalists, government officials, and scholars to create organizational sense, is to comprehend and describe organizational materiality in light of an organizing structure with
which they are most familiar, the corporation. As al Qaeda increasingly frustrates the West, a metatext begins to converge among these voices. Jackson (2006, p. 250–251) suggests,

Both before and after 11 September 2001, the term al Qaeda has been used to refer to a range of combinations of different organizational components: First, there is the original network, the one that committed 9/11, which uses its own resources and people it has recruited and trained. Then there is the ad-hoc terrorist network, consisting of franchise organizations that al Qaeda created ... The third network [is] a strategic union of like-minded companies ... Finally, there is the fourth network, ‘imitators, emulators.’

Earlier, Bergen (2001, p. 32) portrayed al Qaeda as a holding company, bringing different network partners and various combinations of physical and non-physical assets together, to complete various projects. Judge (2008) has collected a number of different commercial metaphors for al Qaeda including for example:

Thomas L Friedman: ‘The al Qaeda threat has ... become franchised. It is no longer vertical, something that we can punch in the face. It is now horizontal, flat and widely distributed, operating through the Internet and tiny cells.’

Another formulation presented in the LA Times posits al Qaeda as an organization which is ‘executing corporate style takeovers of regional Islamic extremist groups’ and ‘co-opts affiliates’ (LA Times, 2007, p. A12). This construction of al Qaeda as a huge monolithic global corporation trying to take over the world evokes for Western audiences a competitive, winner take all, evil organization that will not stop until it has conquered everything and everyone. According to a senior fellow at Brookings, ‘Absolutely we should be alarmed by this. They are creating franchises and buying franchises, offering experts, networks, and money’ (LA Times, 2007, p. A12).

The construction of al Qaeda as a corporate giant (with all the attendant resources, expertise, centrality, reach, etc.) is done through the evocation of agency across a large variety of types, including non-human agents. In another example of non-human agency contributing to the construction of al Qaeda as a global corporation, ‘terrorism experts’ (unnamed in news sources) suggest that other Islamic groups have ‘jumped at the chance to align themselves with the al Qaeda brand name’ which has soared in popularity because of its increasingly sophisticated multi-media campaigns in various countries (LA Times, 2007, p. A12). Further, agency is not only invested in the ‘brand name’ but also with the equivalent of corporate contracts, as noted by US officials who suggest that ‘the alliance is not so much a merger but a takeover of the GSPC [the Algerian Salafi organization Group for Call and Combat] which Reidel [former CIA intelligence official, till last month] said came only after “many many months of discussions about the terms and conditions would be” between Zawahiri and Bin Laden and GSPC leader Abdelmalek Droudkel’ (LA Times, 2007, p. A12).

Raab and Milward (2003, p. 423) employ another corporate model in their discussion of al Qaeda as a form of ‘dark network.’

The evidence we have so far suggests al Qaeda functions as an umbrella organization that initiates attacks. It seems similar in structure to the hollow corporation model (Business Week, 1986; Milward and Provan, 2000, 362), where central functions are finance, planning, strategy, and marketing but where the operating units are relatively autonomous and operate under contractual relationship with the corporation. Nike is the exemplar for this type of organizational structure.

As evidence began to mount that many of the terrorists and terrorist organizations that were acting in the name of a global violent jihad had no visible connections to al Qaeda or any of its members,
attention was also turned to al Qaeda as an inspiration, as a model, and to the role that its rationale and reading of the historical record and contemporary political situation had done to create groups acting on its behalf. Again, a corporate metaphor is employed to provide the conversational framework.

Al Qaeda has gained notoriety as an organization that not only seeks to establish itself in the international 

\textit{jihad}, but wants to encourage others to do so also. Thus, al Qaeda not only works as a network firm, but as a venture capitalist enterprise, encouraging like-minded entrepreneurs to create ‘start-up’ organizations in the same field. (McAllister, 2004, p. 305)

Indeed, Judge (2008), citing Raymond Whitaker and Paul Lashmar (2005) suggests that

‘Franchise terrorism’ is now being used to describe the evolution of a loose ‘al-Qaida’ network into an even looser network through which those trained return home to galvanize others and pass on their expertise. This commercial metaphor, as noted above, is ensuring that the highly successful ‘franchising’ of terrorism by ‘al-Qaida’ precludes the detection of any other ‘brand’ as being the ‘genuine product’ – with a consequent lack of ability to detect the ‘market share’ of the ‘unbranded’ varieties, especially those of local origin. Ironically ‘al-Qaida’ may even be faced with what might be termed ‘counterfeiting’ of its hallmarks by ‘unfranchised’ terrorists.

Given the continued paucity of material evidence linking al Qaeda the organization, bin Laden the leader, and other individuals and entities that continue to commit acts of terror, but also the continuing ‘knowledge’ that al Qaeda the organization is connected to, responsible for, approves or inspires the action, alternatives to the franchise model have also been explored. Jackson (2006, p. 250) argues that ‘Given the broad variety of individuals, activities, behaviors, and groups that have been placed under the umbrella term “al Qaeda,” it is not surprising that a consensus does not exist regarding how to classify and describe the organization.’ After eight years of close scrutiny and voluminous conversations, there is not yet the sort of recursive creation of metatext that seems so natural in the case of transparent organizations.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the ways in which secrecy fundamentally alters the possibility for the establishment, negotiation, or enactment of canonical scripts. We are not suggesting that al Qaeda is not communicatively constituted but rather that the mechanisms by which al Qaeda is constituted include but are not limited to local processes of imbrication. Hence, the ontological status of al Qaeda remains an enigma; it is constituted in a variety of ways, embodying multiple organizational types with varying degrees of specificity. Moreover, given the clandestine nature of both internal and external organizing, it is not only those outside the organization who rely upon the macro historical/political texts to constitute al Qaeda; the members themselves, constrained by the lack of both interaction and transparency, produce their own texts which are strongly rooted in their own cultural experience. For both members and non-members, al Qaeda is primarily constituted as a political institutional and economic entity that is grounded in historical processes.

A second feature of the Montreal framework that is difficult to reconcile with clandestine organizing is that every example in the Montreal School contains public tracings of organizations that legitimately reflect organizational processes, no matter how diverse the interpretation of those processes. In some cases, there are public archives or records of meetings, in others there are videotaped interactions, shown on public television, and in others there are tape recordings, interviews with organizational members, etc. In all cases there are known members of the organizations, and these members’ voices, as diverse as they may be, are considered legitimate members of the organizations, co-orienting through narrative and material processes.
But clandestine organizations have only fragmentary materiality. In the case of al Qaeda we have multiple conversations of possible organizational structures and agents, provided by multiple actors including journalists, scholars, governments, interrogated prisoners, captured documents (some of which may or may not be legitimate), and various statements which may or may not be designed to mislead, contradictory claims of responsibility, and video and audio tapes which describe, explain and construct various organizations of al Qaeda. These conversations create texts, in which al Qaeda is constituted as an organization, that are not grounded and cannot be verified by the conversations of the members, the very processes that according to Taylor et al. constitute the organization.

In other words, issues of legitimacy and voice are under-theorized when organizations are transparent, but need to be brought to the fore when we consider clandestine organizations. Consider the two conditions Taylor suggests that have not been adequately accounted for in traditional organizational theory: (1) the organization’s basis in the delegation of responsibility for the performance of tasks, and (2) the emergence of the organization as an actor in its own right capable of entering into dialogue as a participant, and able to communicate an intention, or purpose, as a voice distinct from that of any of its members. Within the theory, a crucial part of the metaconversation is the ‘emergence of a spokesperson, since such a privileged voice is a condition for, as much as a consequence of, the constitution of collective entities’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 630).

In clandestine organizations, the legitimacy of spokespersons is highly contested in complex and nuanced ways. In contrast to corporate organizations, government organizations, NGOs, or academic groups where there is a general consensus as to who speaks for the organization (e.g. public relations managers and CEOs do while whistle blowers do not), in clandestine organization such as al Qaeda, who, beyond Osama bin Laden or Ayman al Zawahiri, may be accepted or identified as spokespersons? The multitude of discredited linkages to al Qaeda (whether they be pretend- ers, confederates, supporters, champions, or enemies) clearly marks a difference between the transparent and clandestine organizations.

As the Montreal school articulates, all organizations are co-constructed by their members as well as externally by others. ‘What an organization is’ always depends on who is speaking in its name, on its behalf, or for it. In a clandestine organization, there is no way – from the outside – to really know who is authorized to speak in the name of an organization. This means that even someone from the outside could start to speculate about what this organization is, what it wants to do, what its resources are, etc. and have legitimacy. In other words, clandestinity creates a situation where many people can position themselves as speaking for this organization: journalists, scholars, editorialists, laypeople, and anyone who thinks they have something to say about ‘it.’ When there is a (relative) transparency, there are ways to control (more or less) these attributions (because there are official voices, voices that can, of course, always be challenged by journalists and whistle- blowers), but this control apparently vanishes with clandestine organizations.

For example, on 14 March 2004, the Spanish government reported receiving a video that claimed al Qaeda had set the deadly explosions that killed hundreds of Spaniards in the Madrid train station (Sciolino & Alvarez, 2004). Al Qaeda’s mission, motives, location, recruitment strategies, etc. were publicly constructed based on this claim. Al Qaeda neither confirmed nor denied and even if a spokesperson had emerged the credibility of the claim and/or the person would be suspect. Moreover the discursive construction of al Qaeda as an organization with the resources and reach to carry out the attack probably served its purpose well. Two years later, the Madrid bombing probe found that the al Qaeda link was illegitimate and the videotape was disconfirmed (Associated Press, 2006). More recently on 10 March 2008, a militant group in North Africa claimed it had kidnapped two Austrian tourists in Tunisia. Three days later terrorism experts in Washington and Vienna discounted the claim of the self declared spokesman (Algeria Watch,
This contestation of who speaks for the organization, and a clandestine organization’s inability to control attributions of legitimacy is part of the metaconversation that needs to be more directly addressed. Thus, the question arises, how can we better understand the conversations that take place in the constitution of clandestine organizations?

The Composite of influences

Taylor and Robichaud (2004, p. 397) argue that

… the process of organizing – the organizational ‘conversation’ – is a composite of influences, in that (1) agency draws on the resources of language to effect co-orientation while (2) the texts that people produce reflect their involvement in a mixed, or ‘hybrid,’ material and social environment (Latour, 1993).

Clearly, within the Montreal School social context is a critical aspect of the organizational ‘conversation’ that constitutes organizations. Context embodies the relationships, rules, resources, record, and regions in which organizing takes place and features the reflexive sense making practices of interpretive readings, alternative rationalities, and ethical responsibilities (Stohl & Stohl, 2008). Given our limited space, we will discuss only a few contextual features in which the communicative constitution of organizations is embedded. Our point is that when the treatment of the social context assumes transparency, questions regarding organizational embeddedness in social context become unnecessarily constrained and limited. We suggest that when norms and expectations are known, even if they are not shared, the context is routinely examined and what is most remarkable is often unacknowledged. Focusing upon clandestine organizations brings these taken-for-granted processes to the foreground.

Take, for example, the basic building block of conversational context, a relationship. In the analysis of the city manager, there was the presumption that relationships were knowable and predicated upon social rules and conventions. Earlier we detailed how his reconstruction of the citizens and the city as an organization is based on a priori shared knowledge of the significant and legitimate roles of city administration and citizen. The reciprocal agreement, historically grounded in the evolution of specific types of relations among a particular nation state, its cities, and the populace, is not acknowledged in Robichaud et al.’s analysis, but is very important to the logic of the analyses. When organizations are clandestine, however, the structure, constraints, and opportunities among relationships are not apparent and problematized and force us to look more closely at what are the constitutive features of organizational relations. More than a century ago, Simmel (1906) in The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies, makes this point in terms similar to those of the Montreal school. He begins by arguing that reciprocity is implicitly considered the foundation of all social organization and the conversations that constitute that relationship.

The customary reciprocal presentation, in the case of any somewhat protracted conversation, or in the case of contact upon the same social plane, although at first sight an empty form, is an excellent symbol of that reciprocal apprehension which is the presumption of every social relationship. (Simmel, 1906, p. 441–442)

However, Simmel recognizes that this ‘reciprocal apprehension’ is altered when we examine the secret society which, by definition, cuts itself off from the presumed social relationship.

So soon, however, as a group as such seizes upon secrecy as its form of existence, the sociological meaning of the secrecy becomes internal. It now determines the reciprocal relations of those who possess the secret in common. (Simmel, 1906, p. 470).
The constitution of the clandestine organization, then, does not appear within the public sphere and access to these relations must come from elsewhere. The conversation is circumscribed and relegated to sets of relations that may or may not be connected to the larger community even in the most basic sense. Communicative norms are inoperative and role expectations are violated such that the social context itself takes on new meanings. Where can scholars look? We suggest that for clandestine political groups such as al Qaeda and other organizations as well, circumscribed conversations are found in the socio-historical and political context.

However, much of the historical record with respect to the constitution of organizations is often seen as unproblematic; the received view makes it unnecessary to be interrogated, history is not open to debate or interpretation. Thus the historical record is rarely brought to a level of the discussable (1) although scholars like Howard Zinn (1980) dramatically demonstrate how the contested terrain of history strongly contributes to the communicative constitution of all social organizations, and (2) despite the fact that under conditions of organizational transparency the materials (e.g. archival records, interviews) are available to reconstruct the contestation.

In clandestine organizations, the historical record is contested by those already behind the curtain of secrecy, and thus it is ever more difficult to engage the dispute. The result is that discussions about the emergence of terrorist organizations focus not on organizing but on the individual psychologies of the terrorists (see Stohl, 1983) and their personal connections (Sageman, 2004). Our analyses of these organizations is shrouded and shaped by our own belief system. For example Krueger (2006), discussing where terrorism emerges, examines country-level statistics on economic conditions and terrorist attacks absent any discussion of the political grievances (‘real’ or ‘imagined’) that might account for organizational mobilization. Mirroring many traditional ahistorical organizational approaches, the analyses rely heavily upon psychological indicators. Rarely is there a discussion of how groups create boundaries, perceive their grievances, relate those grievances to their imagined community, or how groups reflect upon their unsuccessful attempts to resolve these grievances in the past.

Only when we begin to pay attention to the renderings of organizational histories and the context in which they occur can we fully understand the communicative constitution of organizations. For example, clandestine organizations often provide statements of responsibility, in which they attempt to balance their means and ends and the ethics and values which underlie them. The discursive process of taking responsibility often has far greater consequence for the constitution of organization than the goals themselves. Yet it takes an understanding of the history to be able to either make sense of or understand the complexities of the discourse of responsibility. That al Qaeda understands the constitutive nature of these conversations is demonstrated in a letter published in July 2005 by Ayman al-Zawahiri, purportedly al Qaeda’s second in command, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (now deceased), the leader of the organization which renamed itself al-Qaeda in Iraq (formerly al-Tawhid wal-Jihad). Zawahiri attempts to communicate from one clandestine organization to another how Zarqawi’s targeting of other Muslims is damaging the message of trust and reassurance, the organizational image that the terrorist organization against non-Muslims and apostates is designed to produce. Thus, the mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve, if there is no contravention of Sharia in such avoidance, and as long as there are other options to resort to, meaning we must not throw the masses – scant in knowledge – into the sea before we teach them to swim… (Zawahiri, 2005)

However, unlike the case of the transparent organization typically studied through transcripts of meetings and videotaped sessions, we have to interpret the constitutive nature of this conversation without the benefit of the discussion which led to its issue and without the benefit of the reciprocity of the response and subsequent discussions about ends and means. We can only begin to interpret the letter by relying on our knowledge of the context. Significantly, in this particular case, external
observers who are steeped in the history of the Shia–Sunni schism that began in the year 632, are able to consider and debate several possible interpretations of the message, each of which builds insight and complexity to the constitution of al Qaeda: (1) Is Zawahiri addressing Zarqawi as a member of the organization who is creating difficulties for the organization or as an ‘outsider’ who, were he to continue to conduct operations in this way, will hurt the larger cause? (2) Does the discourse represent a debate within the al Qaeda organization concerning whether al Qaeda’s cause includes confronting the Sunni–Shia schism? Of course interpretation is always needed when trying to understand any organizational discourse, but because in the clandestine organization so many of the important components for understanding the organizational conversation remain opaque, the criticality of considering the historic record is underscored.

The constitutive role of history is perhaps most compelling when we consider the recruitment of members into a clandestine organization. At the same time the organization needs to maintain impenetrability, it is seeking to recruit members and obtain support from those it purports to represent. The recruitment and retention of members or sympathizers are not simply rooted in public conversation but in the historical record, past experiences, and prior relationships, as well as the cultural values and interpretive frames of the populace. Thus, historical grievances often centuries old, unspoken assumptions of family duties, ties, and faith, as well as assumptions about legitimate and illegitimate actions mean little has to be spoken or written about the need to support (or at least acquiesce to) actions against the British by the IRA, or the Israelis by Hamas, or the Sri Lankan majority by the Tamil Tigers. Slogans and symbols are sufficient to establish the link to the long-standing grievance as well as the enemy. The recruitment thus centers on the silent evocation of past texts and recruits’ willingness to risk themselves and demonstrate their proof of purpose and trust.

Besides highlighting embedded organizational conversation in historical records, clandestine organizations also bring the importance of material location to the fore. Globalization theorists remind us that the disembedding of events and institutions permits new realignments and restructuring of social interaction across time and space. But following Cooren et al.’s (2006) arguments regarding the significance of non-human agency, we suggest that region, that is, the location of events, people, organizations, and their relative spatial positioning, matters. Location strongly influences organizational opportunities and constraints, literally embedding the organization in a social context. For example, in the case of al Qaeda, there are two competing external approaches to understanding its organizational mission, both of which are rooted within spatial frameworks (see Esposito, 2002; Gerges, 2005; Bergen, 2001, for detailed discussions of these competing views). The first believes that al Qaeda has concrete political goals, an identification of the near and far enemy (tied to Islamic thought), with the near enemy the apostate regimes in the Middle East and the far enemy tied to the role of the United States in the Middle East and the future of the Israeli state. In this view al Qaeda’s actions are in support of removing these apostate regimes, the elimination of the Israeli state, and the withdrawal of the United States from an active role in the region. In the competing view, al Qaeda has a very expansive view of the caliphate and is engaged in an existential struggle with the West and non-believers in general. In this conception of its mission and its location in time and space there is no compromise or bargaining that is possible. Both these positions help us situate al Qaeda and perhaps lay the groundwork for complementary strategies of response.

The focus on clandestine organizations also points out the constitutive nature of the political dimensions of organizing. Different voices may have quite disparate needs in determining the contours and content of the emerging organizational conversation. It is frequently the case, for example, that external observers talk about and assume much greater organizational scale and scope of clandestine organizations than the evidence suggests. Ironically, the magnification of the size and exaggeration of the scope of a clandestine organization may constitute the organization in ways
that are beneficial for all parties: for governmental organizations, the larger the clandestine organization the more justification for measures and actions that might otherwise be unacceptable; for the clandestine organization, such discussion and actions on the part of the state, press, and community increase their appeal to the community at large. The communicative inflation of an organization and the threat it poses also benefits insurgents who threaten states and regimes because the enlargement creates doubt in the minds of the greater community as to the ability of the regime to prevail. For example, although historians agree that the revolutions which swept across Europe in 1848 did not involve a Europe-wide clandestine organization, contemporary rulers often exaggerated the scale, scope, and links of the local organizing efforts they confronted to justify repression (Berenson, 2001, p. 570). These conversations brought publicity and coherence to an organization that did not exist, but was construed and enacted by those whose interests were served by its constitution, in this case both the revolutionaries and the state.

In the contemporary era, as we have argued previously, (Stohl & Stohl, 2007), it served the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror’ and its expansion of that war to Iraq to have al Qaeda the organization be large in membership (60,000 members was claimed at one point) and geographic scope (an early claim was operating in 60 countries). It also served the interests of al Qaeda to have those claims made, as they amplified their potential ability to generate voice and consequent fear in those they were targeting and support and hope among those from whom they were seeking support, both political and material.

Conclusions

In this paper we have delineated the contributions Taylor and his colleagues have made to the study of organization and organizing and in particular their discussions of the agents (human, textual, other non-humans) involved in the communicative constitution of organization. As they have argued, conversation represents the ‘communicative activities of agents,’ and the ways in which organizational problems are formulated, presented, and made sense of. Framed within a material social environment, conversation is the site where organizing occurs and where agency and text, discursively based interpretations defining agents, purposes, and organizations, are generated.

As we have seen, there are two central components to their overall argument. The first, that organizations are language-based and constituted by multiple voices, cognitive domains, and communities of practice, is well accepted. The second, that organizations emerge ‘from the recursive processes of the conversations of the members where each conversation narratively frames, explicitly or implicitly, the previous one’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 624) provides an opportunity to expand the understanding of the conversation, text, and organizing into new arenas.

We have suggested that the metaconversations upon which they focus are far less likely to occur in the relations between clandestine organizations and other communities of practice. We have argued that despite its theoretical fluidity and dynamism, embedded within the Montreal school approach is the subtle but significant principle of organization that we label as the embedded transparency principle, a formal evolving system that is knowable, through conversations across multiple, overt communities of practice. We have argued that in cases of clandestine organizations such as al Qaeda, the a priori materiality of the organization is far less apparent and the organization’s ontological status is more likely to be contested.

We have also argued that issues of legitimacy and voice are under-theorized when organizations are transparent, but need to be brought to the fore when we consider clandestine organizations and that clandestine organizations have only fragmentary materiality. Thus, unlike the studies provided by Taylor and his colleagues in which the cases are built upon analysis of transparent records,
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attempts to study interactions, interviews, and membership rosters of clandestine organizations depend upon not only fragmentary but also often contested archives, records, and spokespersons and thus require much greater attention to the social context in which the constitution of these organizations occur. Organizational texts and conversations are embodied in the sociocultural, historical and political context and must be taken into account.

In the opening decade of the 20th century, during a period in which citizens feared the threat of anarchists and ‘bomb throwers,’ scholars concerned with organization as well as novelists pondered the unique aspects of secret societies. While Simmel (1906) was pioneering the scholarly study of the secret societies of his age, G. K. Chesterton considered the anarchist threat in The Man who was Thursday: A Nightmare (1908). The novel features a Central Anarchist Council where members, who have been selected and recruited by other members, take the name of the seven days of the week. As the plot unfolds and the protagonist Gabriel Syme pursues the anarchist leadership, we learn one by one that all the members of the Anarchist Council are, in fact, undercover police agents. There are no anarchists in the group. The Central Anarchist Council and the coordinated anarchist threat appear to be a figment of the public imagination stoked by the police forces whose brief it is to protect the public.

While the anarchist threat itself which Chesterton satirized was real, the novel illustrates how the clandestine nature of the associated organizations prevented a clear understanding of the organizational dynamics, boundaries, linkages, and its membership. The organization constituted in and through human communication had circumscribed the reciprocal relationships we assume are fundamental features of organizing. Clandestine organizations force us to reckon with the consequences of our assumptions about organizing.

Throughout this paper we have identified several competing organizational texts. The theoretical, methodological and practical implications of understanding clandestine organization are well illustrated by one of the most significant debates between those who argue that the al Qaeda is a large scale, global organization threat vs. those that would argue that the threat is not ‘the’ al Qaeda organization but many different smaller scale, less organized groups and/or leaderless resistance who are more likely to produce smaller and less coordinated attacks and thus a lower strategic threat (Hoffman, 2008; Sageman & Hoffman, 2008). The former suggests a counterterror response that requires major mobilization of the department of defense and the military, homeland security – the enormous counterterror machine that has been created. The latter suggests marshaling resources through the law enforcement machinery, the intelligence agencies, and cooperation with like organizations abroad. The consequences of the choice to be made are significant in terms of public policy investments and potential outcomes. A better understanding of the conversations and how organizations constitute themselves and their relationships with other communities of practice should inform the debate as to how to proceed.

We therefore suggest that attention to clandestine organizations brings attention to the social context in new and important ways. These composites of influence embed the discussion of organization and organizing within the social context in which they occur, and their focus upon agency, materiality, and discourse will provide greater texture and nuance for future studies employing the Montreal school’s pioneering approach to organization and organizing.

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