Position Paper

Organizational Sociology in the Swiss Context: Bridging Traditionalist and Modernist Logics

Merve Gül Barut

Organizations are central to how societies produce value, manage change, and negotiate their collective futures. Over the past century, waves of modernity have transformed organizational life, introducing the twin pressures of rationalization and standardization (Schumpeter, 1934) on the one hand, and culturalization and symbolism (Suddaby, Ganzin, & Minkus, 2017; Reckwitz, 2019) on the other. These shifts compel organizations to innovate while preserving the identity and legitimacy rooted in traditional craft-based practices. The tension between tradition and modernity is not a temporary stage to be "resolved" but an enduring paradox—one that continually reshapes organizational forms, practices, and the meanings attached to products and services.

Switzerland offers an exceptional setting to study this paradox. Its organizational landscape encompasses long-standing industries with deep cultural roots, such as watchmaking and agrifood, alongside globally oriented sectors such as pharmaceuticals, finance, and commodity trading. These organizations are shaped by tensions between tradition and modernity, artisanal craft and technological efficiency. The proposed Research Committee (RC) "Organization and Society" provides a timely platform to examine how such tensions are shaped by relational and collective processes in the Swiss organizational landscape. My research, while empirically situated in the handmade cymbal industry, offers conceptual tools directly relevant to this agenda.

Drawing on organization theory and market sociology, my work examines how long-established industries evolve under sustained modernist pressures. Through qualitative research—including historical analysis, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis—it shows that tradition is not passively eroded but actively reconfigured through the interdependent actions of producers, intermediaries, and consumers. Although my empirical focus is cymbal making with Turkish roots, the dynamics I study resonate strongly with Swiss industries. For illustration, the Swiss mechanical watchmaking industry offers a parallel case rich with empirical potential. Similar parallels can be found in high-end chocolate or cheese making, where heritage is a core source of value but innovation remains essential to market success.

One strand of my research investigates product singularization—the collective construction of valuation frameworks that preserve the distinctiveness of traditional products

in the face of modernist substitutes. In the cymbal case, producers lead this process by emphasizing the "incalculable" qualities of their craft, embedding products in historical and cultural narratives. Comparable dynamics are evident in the revitalization of Swiss mechanical watchmaking. Following market disruption from quartz technology, producers redefined the meaning and value of mechanical watches (Raffaelli, 2019), positioning them as luxury cultural goods rather than mere timekeeping devices. Notably, successful Swiss producers defied the common expectation of adhering solely to tradition and craftsmanship (e.g., Cattani, Dunbar, & Shapira, 2017) by embracing novelty and innovation as integral complements to their heritage. This raises questions the RC could integrate into its agenda: How do organizations in long-established Swiss industries validate and legitimate novelty without undermining heritage-based value? What collective strategies allow tradition and novelty to operate as mutually reinforcing, rather than conflicting, sources of legitimacy (Raffaelli, DeJordy, & McDonald, 2022)?

Another strand of my research focuses on emergent producer collectives within entrenched industries. In the cymbal industry, independent cymbal smiths—often professional drummers turned artisans—established a distinctive position by blending innovation with tradition. They employed narrative strategies that bridged their identities as musicians with their roles as producers, enabling them to gain legitimacy not by outright disruption, but by creative reinterpretation of established practices. The Swiss Independent Watchmakers Pavilion (SIWP) offers a parallel context: a group of small, independent producers who define themselves in contrast to large watchmaking groups, remaining rooted in craft traditions. Studying such groups in the Swiss context could address questions such as: How do emergent producers differentiate themselves from powerful incumbents in long-established industries? Which narrative and strategies are most effective in gaining recognition from consumers, industry peers, and gatekeepers?

Examining these questions in the Swiss context would deepen our understanding of how organizations navigate the paradox of tradition and modernity. My research conceptualizes this paradox not as a threat to tradition, but as a generative force—one that enables long-established industries to adapt, preserve their distinctiveness, and thrive. Integrating such perspectives into the RC's agenda would equip Swiss organizational sociology to theorize the mechanisms that sustain viability in hybrid, tradition–modern configurations. This will place Swiss cases at the center of international scholarly debates, enriching both comparative research and the theoretical renewal of organizational sociology.

References

Cattani, G., Dunbar, R. L. M., & Shapira, Z. (2017). How commitment to craftsmanship leads to unique value: Steinway & Sons' differentiation strategy. *Strategy Science, 2*, 13–38.

Raffaelli, R. (2019). Technology reemergence: Creating new value for old technologies in Swiss mechanical watchmaking, 1970–2008. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 64*(3), 576–618.

Raffaelli, R., DeJordy, R., & McDonald, R. M. (2022). How leaders with divergent visions generate novel strategy: Navigating the paradox of preservation and modernization in Swiss watchmaking. *Academy of Management Journal, 65*(5), 1593–1622.

Reckwitz, A. (2020). *The society of singularities*. Polity Press.

Schumpeter, J. A. (1934). *The theory of economic development: An inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest, and the business cycle.* Harvard University Press.

Suddaby, R., Ganzin, M., & Minkus, A. (2017). Craft, magic and the re-enchantment of the world. *European Management Journal, 35*(3), 285–296.