Transpoiesis: the art of doing organization without becoming one

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This paper uses the concept of transpoiesis to describe the mechanisms that sustain social movements. Emerging from ethnographic research on the World Social Forum (WSF) and inspired by systems theory, transpoiesis emphasizes the dynamic balance within social movements between decentralized organization and strategic coherence. This differentiates it from autopoiesis, which focuses on self-sustaining systems that maintain and reproduce their structure autonomously through internal processes, rather than emphasizing the dynamic balance between decentralized organization and strategic coherence. Transpoiesis offers a particularly instructive model in the digital age, when classical explanations often fail to account for the rapid pace of change, innovation, flexibility and decentralized collaboration that characterize modern organizations. The concept aids in understanding how social movements build collective identities, navigate organizational dynamics, structure collective learning, and contribute to social change. Moreover, it reflects the broader shift toward network-based arrangements in contemporary organizations, an adaptation to the complexities of the digital environment.

KEYWORDS

social movement theories, social movements, collective learning, temporary organization, partial organization, systems theory, organizational learning, organizational education

1 Introduction: collective learning in the dynamics of social movements

We see growth, excitement and dynamism of the World Social Forum process in the proliferation of social forums. Over 40 national, regional and thematic forums are taking place in 2010 alone. These forums are creating innovations to the social forum process and responding to local contexts and needs of progressive social movements. The International Council was originally established to provide overall coordination of the annual WSF events. When the event shifted to being bi-annual, the IC's focus also changed to management of the overall process. Now the WSF has further evolved with the emergence of the numerous national, regional and thematic forums (Protocol of the International Council, 2010).

The above statement is taken from the meeting protocol of the International Council (IC) of the World Social Forum (WSF) that took place in 2010 in Mexico City. It illustrates how the idea of organizing a social forum has expanded across borders since the first WSF in 2001 and has materialized by "responding to local contexts and the needs of progressive social movements." All emerging national, regional and thematic social forums are taken as a sign of "growth, excitement and dynamism," and yet also create a demand for coordination and "management of the overall process." It is precisely at this juncture that the question of what

constitutes a movement arises. The core objective of this paper is to explore how best to conceptualize a social movement, moving beyond the reductionist view either that it is a loosely connected series of protest events, or a centrally coordinated network. Instead, it aims to capture the complex and elusive nature of social movements.

Social movements are currently a focus of educational research (Novelli et al., 2021; Niesz, 2022). Beyond historically, social movements are also understood in their present as sites of educational processes, and both collective and individual learning (Miethe and Roth, 2016; Schröder, 2017a). Additionally, social movements are increasingly discussed in the context of social work. Social work originated in the wider context of social movements (Schröder, 2022b). The relationship between the two has been redefined in contemporary discourse (Kleibl et al., 2024). Social movements are often theorized as the "communication systems" (Ahlemeyer, 1989) or even "immune systems" (Luhmann, 1996) of society, with the function not only of observing society but also of contributing to social transformation (Berberoglu, 2019).

In the early stages of movement research at the beginning of the 20th century (Hellmann and Koopmans, 1998), social movements were conceptualized as counterforces to prevailing politics. Since the 1970s, they have increasingly been regarded as normal actors in democratic societies, except within the framework of "contentious politics" (McAdam et al., 2008). However, current social movements are increasingly characterising themselves once again as counterforces to prevailing politics. This is partly due to disillusionment with representative democracy and a sense of being bypassed in government decision-making (Nohl, 2022). This is particularly evident in phenomena of societal self-empowerment, observable in increased violations of laws and regulations on idealistic, political, or ethical grounds (Kirsch et al., 2023). Consequently, the protest scene has become more diverse and at the same time more contradictory (Roth and Rucht, 2019).

In light of these developments, a tactical shift in the orientation of the WSF has been discussed to make it a more effective force for change in society (Schröder, 2022a). Before the 20th anniversary of the WSF in 2021, a number of actors came together to initiate a reform process within the main body of the WSF, the International Council (Group for the Renewal of the World Social Forum, 2022). Three reasons are cited for initiating reform in the WSF. Firstly, the number of participants and the media attention the WSF receives have declined so sharply that the group risks becoming insignificant. Secondly, the WSF has adhered so steadfastly to the Charter of Principles, a set of guidelines created after the first Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001 to consolidate the decisions made there and direct future gatherings, that it has failed to adapt to the changing global political landscape. Consequently, it has lost connection with current social movements. Thirdly, the decision-making processes within the existing organizational structures, particularly the International Council, are opaque, undemocratic, and no longer represent the most important social movements and intellectual voices of today.

These reasons for WSF reform are shared by some who argue that the WSF should remain as it is: an open space. However, the goal of the "International Renewal Group" to transform the WSF from an open exchange space into a global political subject is highly contested. This group consists of people who have been members of the International Council since its inception. Contributions from their authors demonstrate the desire to counter neoliberal and right-wing

forces with a renewed WSF in the future. Savio (2019) – a member of the International Renewal Group – points out, for example, that the WSF has been paralyzed from the beginning, and unable to effect real change on the international stage. Clearly then, some members of the group are not only aiming for reforms in the WSF process but are seeking the fundamental renewal of the WSF as a "political subject." The Charter of Mexico mentions the establishment of an "International of Civil Society" (Group for the Renewal of the World Social Forum, 2022).

However, both single-loop learning, which involves making strategic adjustments to action to better achieve existing goals without questioning underlying assumptions, and double-loop learning, which involves challenging and revising those fundamental assumptions and values that guide the movement, for the sake of deep transformative change, are at least as challenging in social movements as they are in organizations (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Unlike other comparable learning contexts such as political parties, youth organizations, churches, or self-help groups, social movements lack a formal membership structure that ensures continuous personnel engagement and the direct transmission of knowledge. They also lack a secured organizational framework for knowledge production and archiving (Schröder, 2015). Therefore, a consistently rational and strategically-oriented learning process among collective actors is not to be expected. Instead, social movements consist of informal networks and loose coalitions, where negotiations over common strategies are constructed in a fluid process of self-organization and internal debate. To date, the WSF have never integrated double-loop learning that would have changed their core values. Despite various discussions and proposals, the fundamental principles and open nature of the WSF have remained intact.

On a smaller scale, however, many ideas within the WSF process have involved the successful implementation of single-loop learning. The WSF has evolved into a dynamic platform that brings together global activists, organizations, and individuals to address pressing social and political issues. It serves as a forum where political and social activists, as well as intellectuals, can meet and learn from each other to overcome their current weaknesses. Through numerous national, regional, and thematic forums, the WSF has fostered innovative approaches to social justice, human rights, economic equality, and environmental sustainability. Youth participation, in particular, has become pivotal in recent years. The WSF has provided a space for young people to bring together new perspectives and creative solutions to global problems. Their engagement has led to notable advancements, such as the use of digital tools and social media to broaden the forum's impact and reach, enriching discussions with diverse viewpoints, and bridging generational gaps to foster intergenerational learning and solidarity. A key issue here is the politicization of technology (Schröder, 2017b). This means that the social and political implications of technologies need to be deliberately integrated into discussions and decision-making processes. It involves critically examining how technology affects power dynamics, social justice, and democratic processes. Neglecting this aspect could result in missed opportunities to harness the potential of technology and address the complexities of modern social issues effectively (Wallgren et al., 2022).

In the digital age, where organizational structures are increasingly networked and fluid, the theory of doing organization within social movements offers valuable insights into organizational learning amid digital transformation. Social movements, with their decentralized

coordination and adaptive learning processes, provide a model for how organizations can utilize digital tools and platforms for rapid knowledge dissemination and flexible adaptation. This aligns with Du Gay's (2020) critique of contemporary organizational analysis, which often reduces 'formal organization' to a mere social container rather than engaging with its dynamic and practical aspects. Du Gay argues that many current organizational analyses, influenced by sociological and explanatory tropes, fail to capture the essence of 'organization' and instead view it superficially. By contrasting these views with the principles of organizing at work in social movements, we can gain a deeper understanding of how digital transformation reshapes organizational learning. This perspective emphasizes the need to revisit classic organizational theories and apply their insights to modern challenges, revealing how digital contexts transform both the mechanisms and effectiveness of collective learning and knowledge management within organizations. Thus, examining social movements' adaptive strategies offers a framework for navigating the complexities of digital transformation, highlighting how classical and contemporary theories can converge to address pressing organizational issues.

2 The world social forum: exploring the continuity of social movements over time

Theoretical approaches to social movements often struggle to adequately capture their unity and distinctiveness. For over twenty years, scholars have emphasized the need to explain, rather than simply assume, the nature of social movements (Rupp and Taylor, 1987; Eyerman and Jamison, 2007; Gongaware, 2010): are they temporary, with clear beginnings and endings, or are they better understood in their ebb and flow?

Explanations of how social movements evolve and persist generally fall into two major frameworks (Fillieule and Blanchard, 2013). On the one hand, macrostructural approaches examine how movements adapt to changes in resources or external conditions. This perspective includes organizational approaches, which emphasize the role of an organization's structure, ideology, and culture in enabling Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) to secure resources and maintain member engagement, even in hostile environments or periods of inactivity. On the other hand, political process approaches explore how shifts in political opportunities influence the patterns and strategies of movement mobilization. They also consider how movements develop, give rise to other movements, work in coalition with each other, and affect the broader cultural and political landscape (Meyer and Whittier, 1994). On the other hand, microstructural approaches delve into the internal dynamics of movements, such as recruitment processes, internal conflicts, and the development of collective identity. These approaches have, however, been less developed, and the overarching question remains whether social movements should be perceived in terms of their life cycle or continuity.

The WSF is an intriguing case because its existence for over a decade and a half challenges the common belief in movement literature that social movements rarely endure for extended periods. Generally, movements either vanish relatively quickly or transform into an NGO or political party. The thesis proposed by Michels (1968) since the early 20th century asserts that when movements evolve into formal organizations, they often replace their substantive, idealistic goals with operational objectives. In this process, the leaders of the newly formalized movement use the original ideology as a tool to ensure the survival of the organization, rendering the ideals into mere empty slogans. This phenomenon is considered a 'typical development of social movements' (Mayreder, 1917).

A social movement organizes around core themes that become publicly visible, particularly through actions such as demonstrations or civil disobedience. Through their direct involvement in actions and protests, participants in social movements acquire knowledge about political issues and how to organize effectively to achieve shared goals. While social movements require structures to operate efficiently— structures of decision-making and for interpreting social issues—their ongoing development and maintenance are crucial. Without these structures, connections between participants can weaken, leading to the movement's swift dissolution. The structures within movements are often fragile, and their decline can result from various factors, such as waning interest in the cause, concessions from opponents, or intensified state repression. Additionally, a movement risks fading due to its structural weaknesses or, paradoxically, through formalization. Although formal structures can enhance organizational efficiency, they may also compromise the movement's ideals by shifting the focus to the maintenance of structure, leadership roles, and procedural concerns. This shift can lead to an instrumental approach, similar to that found in conventional political parties and for-profit businesses, prioritizing means and ends over the original (idealistic) goals of the movement (Schröder, 2015).

In this sense, social movements are considered the epitome of self-organization. The idea of self-organization is not only part of the self-image of the so-called 'new social movements', but is also the ideological basis of their political program. Decentralisation and participation in decision making are both political goals and ideal-typical forms of organization (Maeckelbergh, 2009). However, in the event that a decentralized network centralises around an inner circle, informal (power) structures can emerge within the network (Freeman, 1972). Responsibilities for tasks and formal roles typically become more institutionalized over time, similar to the structured roles seen in organizations. Within this dynamic, even a group of activists faces the risk of reproducing antiquated patriarchal patterns such as gender roles, or even (re-)creating hierarchical structures (Kleibl et al., 2024). Hierarchies, however, do not always emerge by design. A lack of clear hierarchy can hinder decision-making, leading to inefficiencies and difficulties in mobilizing action. Moreover, a movement organized in a radically horizontal way may struggle to have a political impact on society (Wallerstein, 2004).

Against this backdrop, social movements can be considered prototypes of alternative organizations and forms of social (dis)order that challenge hegemonies. But in their organizational forms, social movements also negotiate a balance between planned and emergent order (den Hond et al., 2015) as tendencies on the trajectory between the decentralisation of networks and the formality of organizations (Sutherland et al., 2014). For researchers, this raises questions on "what balances to strike between openness and closure, dispersion and unity, strategic action and process" (Nunes, 2014) and on how we can theoretically conceptualize the ways of organizing an organizationless organization?

Existing concepts have yet to provide a satisfactory answer in this regard. Luhmann (1996) and others have described social movements

as (special) social systems, but faced the dilemma of classifying social movements within systems theory (Luhmann, 1982). In his conception, Luhmann postulated three levels in the structure of social systems: interaction, organization, and society. These are all introduced as products of a social-cultural evolution toward increased complexity. The threefold scheme has raised the question where to place social systems like movements. According to Luhmann's systems theory, the phenomenon of a social system occurs when the actions of persons are meaningfully related to each other and thereby draw a distinction to an external environment. Social movements challenge central concepts of systems theory, as they encompass more than just a collection of direct interactions. They are characterized by informal communication and a lack of decision-making capacity compared to formal organizations, and their relationship with societal functional systems is highly ambivalent (Kusche, 2016).

Still, for organization theory, systems theory has provided a promising attempt to theoretically conceptualize the art of doing organization without becoming one. To understand the role, in transformation processes, of other social entities at the meso-level, such as networks or social movements, it is essential to elaborate on the specificity of these constructs and examine the extent to which they complement, extend, or even replace the distinctiveness of organizations, particularly their decision-making capacities (Besio and Tacke, 2023). Ahlemeyer (1995) tackles this issue by suggesting that the hypothesis of describing social movements as autopoietic social systems holds only if they are understood as operationally closed, self-referential social systems. His approach views mobilization-oriented communication as a recursively generated fundamental element of social movements that must be continuously renewed within the system. Describing social movements as systems with temporarily complex structures highlights how they must constantly replace their mobilization elements, select their states moment by moment, and can only be influenced through this process. Their stability depends on their ability to relate to the unstable fundamental elements out of which they are made.

A social system has to be able to create self-descriptions that differentiate it from its environment. In doing so, social systems are self-referential. Recursive behavior makes social systems operatively closed. Again, this operative closure cognitively opens up the system to certain structural couplings with its environment(s). This circular process taking place within a system is the essence of the concept of *autopoiesis*. Autopoiesis, as introduced by Maturana and Varela (1980), refers to a system's ability to produce and maintain itself through its own processes. The most striking feature of an autopoietic system is that it "pulls itself up by its own bootstraps," meaning it continuously regenerates and sustains its identity through internal dynamics. While it remains distinct from its environment, this distinction is not rigid, as the system's self-maintenance is inseparable from its interactions with the environment. Essentially, autopoiesis describes a self-sustaining loop where the system defines and maintains itself, even as it remains open to influences from outside[1].

If we agree to the fact that a social movement is not just an ad-hoc group of people but, at least, creates a temporary form of social order (see, e.g., the definition by Diani, 2009 or Snow et al., 2004), then clearly, we can assume that social movements draw a distinction between themselves and their environments (at least for a short period of time)[2], and from this viewpoint that they must be understood as social systems. Yet systems theorists – including Luhmann – have constantly underlined the fact that not all social systems fit well into the scheme of systems theory (Heintz and Tyrell, 2015), which also applies to social movements that can be considered neither as interactions nor as organizations.

By contrast with interactions, a sense of togetherness is created outside of the actual gathering of a movement.[3] Unlike an organization, a movement is not structured hierarchically and does not base its membership (inclusion and exclusion) on decision making. Rather, it is open to an unlimited number of 'personnel' that are mobilized by commitment. What instead characterises a movement are diffused role models and a dispersed network with a relatively short-term existence.

Against this backdrop, Kühl (2014) questions why there has not yet been a modification of the threefold scheme of interaction, organization and society. He identifies three argumentation strategies to preserve the purity of the scheme that can be found in current debates. The first strategy is to say that other social systems such as groups, families or movements can somehow be subordinated to one of the three types of social system. The second way to rescue the scheme is simply to deny that other forms can be counted as social systems. The last line of the argument defends the threefold scheme by pointing out that, in theoretical aesthetics, it would be superior to an alternative scheme, for example fourfold or hierarchical. Nevertheless, Kühl (2014) advocates exploring the benefit derived from an enhancement of the scheme. The challenge is then to prove that groups, families or movements are independent types of social system with their own styles of communication, mechanisms of border demarcation, and types of structural formation. Along these lines, I suggest that theorists further explore how a social movement represents an independent type of social system, from both an empirical and theoretical perspective.

3 The art of doing organization without becoming an organization: the concept of transpoiesis

Based on the ideas of Michels (1968) and Mayreder (1917), it is generally agreed that a movement cannot sustain itself indefinitely without either disappearing or evolving into an organization. Put simply, the key distinction between a movement and an organization is that, while a movement strives to maintain its ideals without

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1   The concept of autopoiesis, originally developed by Maturana and Varela to describe the self-maintenance of living systems, has been transferred by Luhmann and others to the field of sociology to define the self-production of social systems.

2   A social system that would stop the process of differentiating between identity and difference would simply cease to exist.

3   So-called new social movements do not provide ideological orientation like the socialist movement of the 19th century but they still define a unity of the system with vague ideas that mobilize different groups like the protest theme of the WSF: neoliberalism.

compromise, an organization prioritizes its own survival, often at the expense of its original ideals. From studying the organizational structures of the WSF, we can derive a central insight: movements navigate a delicate balance between fragmentation and formal organization. Three dimensions have to be managed: identity, momentum and resources.

The relationship between identity, momentum, and resource management reveals two possible outcomes for a movement. On one hand, if a movement has a very strong identity, low momentum, and low resource management, and is focused solely on ensuring its future existence, it will likely transform into an organization (Michels, 1968). This transformation occurs when the movement solidifies its structure and adopts organizational features such as hierarchy and formal rules to sustain itself. On the other hand, if a movement has a weak identity but exhibits strong momentum and uncompromising ideals, it risks fragmentation (Mayreder, 1917). The combination of a weak identity and high energy may lead to the emergence of competing factions or initiatives, potentially splitting the movement into various parts (Figure 1).

Against the backdrop of my empirical analysis, I will argue that a movement is not only distinctive with respect to the types of organization and interaction it can realize, but also that it involves a form of reproduction distinct from autopoiesis. To illustrate this, I propose the term transpoiesis. The concept of transpoiesis captures the dynamic balance of decentralized organization and strategic coherence within social movements. Transpoiesis is a term that is composed of the prefix *trans* and the noun *poiesis*. The Greek term poiesis means 'to make'. For Aristotle, poiesis is connected to a specific and antecedent purpose or end, and is therefore different from making something as an end in itself. As a principle of organizing, the term poiesis is a modus operandi that continually gives birth to a social movement in the dissension between decay and institutionalisation. The Latin prefix trans means 'through', 'throughout' or 'over'. Occasionally, it also describes a condition or process of inbetweenness, e.g., trans-migration, trans-sexuality or trans-nationality. Through this inbetweenness, terms beginning with the prefix trans often try to disturb the idea that a dominant binary is natural or normal. Without being attributable to either pole of an axis, a 'third' stage or coordinate develops. *Trans*, in this sense, tries to overcome a neutralization of certain social phenomena. 'Organization' is one example of the social phenomena in question. Organization lays claim to naturalness in scientific disciplines as much as in dominant social praxis.

FIGURE 1
Between identity and alterity.
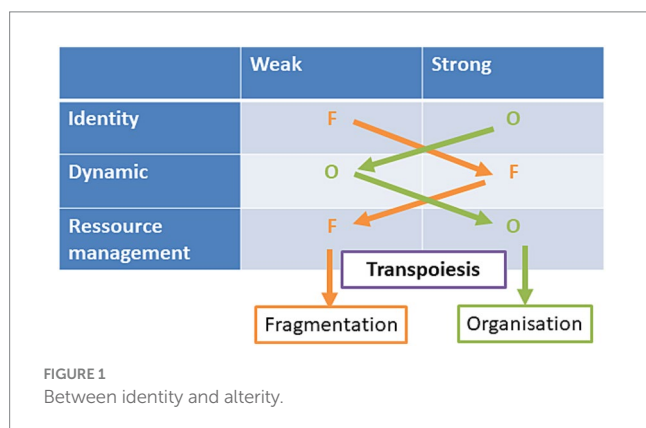
Applied to social organization, transpoiesis describes the art of doing organization by transcending the naturalized pattern of formal organization. This is done by poiesis, understood as a permanent reinvention of the way the movement is organized at a local level (e.g., the way a WSF event is organized). However, the poiesis of a single event always *trans*fers some core elements that makes it part of one opaque but commonly shared idea of the WSF. On the basis of three mechanisms derived from my case study of the WSF (Schröder, 2015), I will reconstruct a particular movement's way of organizing that strikes the balance between the fragmentation of a movement on the one hand, and the need for a strong identity that creates togetherness, centralized decision making and reliable resource management on the other hand. This inbetweenness represents a point of distinction from the concept of autopoiesis. I therefore see a need for new terminology that would better capture the art of doing organization without becoming one: the principle of transpoiesis based on three mechanisms, and resulting from an empirical analysis of the organizational structures of the transnational social movement WSF.

Transpoiesis offers a nuanced lens for understanding organizations in the digital age, where traditional explanations often fall short. This concept, rooted in the framework of interaction, organization, and society outlined by Luhmann (1982), distinguishes social movements as unique social systems that sustain themselves through transpoiesis. In the contemporary context, organizations have increasingly shifted toward network-based structures to navigate the complexities of a digital environment. In recent decades especially, companies have increasingly embraced network-shaped forms like compound networks and virtual organizations, to adapt to a protean digital landscape (Littmann and Jansen, 2000). These structures are often temporary, emerging to fulfill specific tasks before dissolving or reforming for new projects (Modig, 2007). This shift aligns with Ahrne and Brunsson's (2011) notion of "partial organization," which departs from traditional organizational attributes like hierarchy, rigid rules, and formal monitoring.

The WSF represents a paradox. While it lacks traditional organizational features, its absence of structure paradoxically facilitates its organization. The difference between partial organization and a movement lies in perspective. From an organizational standpoint, the challenge is how to do central planning under uncertainty. For the WSF, the challenge is to make the unpredictable manageable without compromising the movement's dynamism. Luhmann (1996) argues that social movements can only be considered autopoietic systems if mobilization rationally aims at certain goals. While the WSF exhibits autopoietic elements, such as the inner circle of the International Council (IC) or the organizing committee, centralization is countered by contra-structural movements that unintentionally contribute to the movement's self-correction and evolution.

4 Methodology: researching the world social forum

The study is based on ethnographical research, which was carried out throughout the period of 2011–2014 (Schröder, 2015). In the beginning of my research I initiated the investigation with an internet search on local social forums and conversations with social forum activists in Germany. This led to an initial hypothesis: if a loosely

organized movement originating in Porto Alegre in 2001 can become the WSF of today, it must have been animated by an effective self-preservation mechanism (Schröder, 2011). However, capturing a field characterized by a decentralized, network-like structure, spanning from local to national and supranational levels, culminating in WSF summits across various countries, proved to be extremely challenging. The concept of a "field" here refers to the idea that the social space being studied is not a pre-existing, objective reality, but rather something constructed through the ethnographic process. As Amit (2000) suggests, in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field must be laboriously constructed by the researcher, pried apart from other possible contexts and relationships it could be connected to. This reflects an epistemological assumption in interpretive social research, where the field is seen as an active creation, not an objective entity awaiting discovery. On the local level, forums frequently emerge and sometimes disappear without any widespread recognition or documentation of their existence. Overall, the research involved continuous reflection, adapting methods, and managing the researcher's impact on the field. Becker (1998) suggests making the research process transparent. This approach ensures the clear reasoning of the researcher, and that their interpretative conclusions are credible and intelligible to readers (Marcus and Cushman, 1982).

The ethnographic research process was divided into three major data collection phases, each followed by an analysis phase. The first phase involved gathering data from several meetings of the International Council, the primary governing body of the WSF, which comprises over 160 movements, NGOs, and trade unions from around the world that provide support. This was followed by a more than two-month data collection period at the WSF office in São Paulo, Brazil, and various meetings of Brazilian social forum activists. The final phase involved over two months of collaboration with the local organizing committee in Tunis, Tunisia, where the WSF took place in 2013. Throughout these phases, supervision sessions with supervisors were conducted via videoconferences and email.

Participant observation was most central to the empirical work. The approach of participant observation emphasizes openness to the research subject, focusing on routine actions and disruptions that reveal underlying social orders. Initially, observations were recorded in field notebooks. Detailed notes included descriptions of the environment, spatial arrangements, and situational processes. Transforming my field notes into an observation protocol imposed a tacit structure of meaning, a process described by Emerson et al. (1995) as analysis-in-description. Objectivity is inherently unattainable, as the researcher is a co-constructive element in the field. Therefore, it was crucial to remain as descriptive and representational as possible when drafting observation protocols, separating analysis from description. Interpretations and ideas were recorded as memos alongside relevant text. Besides participant observation, I analyzed various materials such as meeting minutes, Skype chat logs, financial reports, logos, and website appearances. The creation and archiving processes of these artefacts were also significant, as documents represent a distinct data level and should be analyzed as communicative acts (Wolff, 2007). This means that documents not only serve as a record of information but also convey meaning through their creation, structure, and dissemination, reflecting the intentions and context of their authors. Analyzing meeting minutes from 2000

onwards revealed changes in documentation and how organizational structures evolved. To measure global attention to the WSF summit, I analyzed the frequency of searches for the term "World Social Forum" in various languages on Google and Twitter over time. Expert interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the WSF since its inception, as well as those who worked in different structural units. These interviews mapped the process of structural formation and were recorded and transcribed.

Throughout the research process, I organized conversations, internet searches, and observation notes to systematically analyze key themes. To gain an overview of relevant events, I created timelines documenting what occurred at specific times. Concurrently, I developed preliminary codes to summarize key passages, utilizing MAXQDA software for qualitative data analysis, primarily as a database (Kuckartz, 2010; Kuckartz, 2014). This tool facilitated the comparison of different encodings, the retrieval of thematically linked content, and navigation across materials. To visualize connections between themes and identify recurring patterns, I created timelines and developed preliminary codes. These codes were visualized using a mind map (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003).

Based on that, I selected sequences that reflected field-specific characteristics and analyzed them in collaborative data sessions. These sessions enhanced the validity of interpretations, as collective discussions often introduced fresh perspectives (Reichertz, 2013). A deliberate focus was placed on context-free interpretation, adhering to the principles of objective hermeneutics. Wernet (2014) emphasizes that contextualization should follow initial context-free interpretation to avoid overreliance on contextual elements.

The depth of interpretation varied with the size of analyzed sequences. Shorter excerpts allowed for more detailed analysis, while larger segments offered insight into situational dynamics. To document the analyses, I recorded interpretation sessions and summarized them in memos, where I formulated hypotheses and further questions. This reflective process facilitated the emergence of new perspectives and surprising insights—so-called abductive conclusions—as conceptualized by Reichertz (2013), in line with Peirce's notion of abduction. These abductive conclusions were iteratively tested, with some hypotheses proving robust and others discarded as dead ends. The iterative nature of the research process highlighted the importance of revision opportunities (Breuer, 2010).

Beyond participant observation, the analysis incorporated documents such as meeting minutes, chat logs, and organizational materials. Documents represent distinct data layers that require systematic analysis (Wolff, 2007). For instance, meeting minutes from the International Council dating back to 2000 revealed formal and substantive changes that provided insights into the evolution of organizational structures. These findings were supplemented by expert interviews, where participants were asked to map structural development processes on timelines. This approach combined individual perspectives with documented evidence.

This iterative process involved repeated cycles of data collection and analysis, refining research questions and methods based on emerging data. The result is a grounded theory that is continuously shaped and validated through this dynamic, data-driven approach. This method ultimately leads to well-supported hypotheses and a conceptual framework of transpoiesis, developed with a thorough and iterative research process.

4.1 Mechanism 1: constructing a common identity—between constant reinvention and corporate identity

As a counter-summit to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the WSF movement was initiated in the year 2001 in Porto Alegre (Brazil), under the slogan "another world is possible." Most WSF events have taken place on the same dates as the WEF, to offer an alternative to meetings of the most powerful and wealthy: a forum of and for a global civil society. The WSF mobilises around the topic of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism provides a common ground between social movements, labor unions, NGOs and a wide range of topics such as the exploitation of natural resources, income distribution, racism, sexism, or media monopolies. Consequently, there is not one single topic for political action presented at the WSF but a variety of different themes that call for political engagement. In order to remain broad, the WSF refuses to publish any political statement in its own name (Sousa Santos, 2008). Taking neoliberalism as the lowest common denominator has the advantage that very different groups (e.g., women, youth, environmental or labor movements) can come together and create new connections. This uniting idea of the WSF – called 'open space' – was original at the time of the first WSF, in 2001. Since then, countless diverse regional groups have independently organized national and even city-based social forums. As a consequence, the WSF is not only a main event that takes place almost every year, but first and foremost an umbrella – a uniting idea – for thousands of individual social forum events across the world (Glasius and Timms, 2005).

Faced with such a dispersed network of independent social forums, the challenge was to find the mechanism that allows organizers of these forums to take ownership of single events without losing the interconnectedness between WSF events at large (Czarniawska, 2008). Principally, my empirical analysis shows that the common identity of the WSF varies within a spectrum between two extremes. One extreme is the constant reinvention of each social forum event without reference to its predecessors. The other extreme is an indistinguishable corporate identity across all social forums in their self-depictions. The characteristics of both extremes only partially describe the mechanism that holds the WSF together: a fragile but relatively stable compromise between identity and alterity (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Between structurelessness and hierarchy.
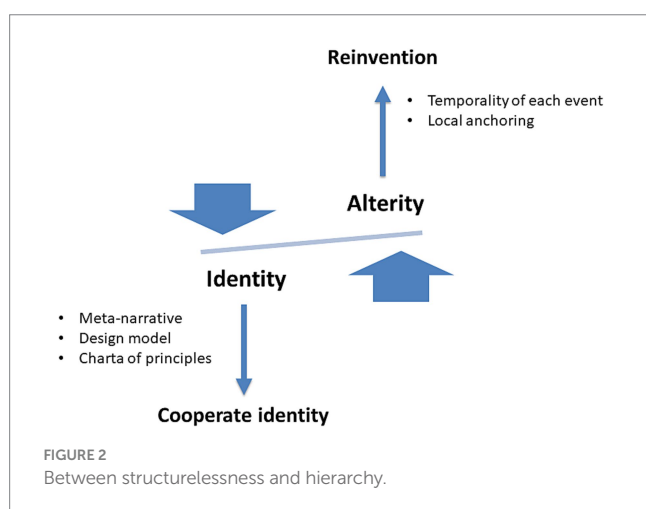
Fundamentally, two aspects of the data support the argument for a permanent reinvention of social forum events. First, nearly all of the websites associated with these events are deleted after they conclude. Google search data from 2004 to 2013 shows a significant increase in search queries during the event period, but this surge stops abruptly once the event is over. It appears that social forum events emerge only for the duration of the event itself and leave few traces behind. Additionally, there seems to be little interest in following up on the protest once the event has ended.

Second, content analysis of the social forums' websites reveals that the context of the region where a forum is held becomes the focus of its announcement. This highlights the unique nature of each event. Additionally, most requests come from users in the region where the event takes place, demonstrating the local character of each event, as well as its temporary nature.

However, in tension with the chaos of singular events, there exists a complex meta-narrative that supports the other extreme: corporate identity. Primarily (but not exclusively), the initiators of the WSF, whose biographies are closely linked to the movement, act as custodians of knowledge, passing down the WSF story. My analysis of different activists' narrations of the WSF story identifies four central reference points: the alter-globalization movements, the city of Porto Alegre and Brazilian history, the World Economic Forum, and the biographies of its founders.

The WSF story is rooted in the history of alter-globalization movements that emerged at the turn of the millennium, setting the stage for the creation of the WSF. During that time, activists built transnational relationships and united against global institutions such as the G8 (a group of eight influential industrial countries) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Despite this global solidarity, most protest events occurred in the so-called 'northern hemisphere', even though activists supported the 'global south'. Choosing the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, a city of the southern hemisphere, was therefore unique. Porto Alegre was selected not only for its location, but also for its reputation as a laboratory for new ideas of democratic participation, such as "participatory budgeting." Additionally, at the time of the first WSF, the Brazilian Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) governed the country and was supported by a sizeable coalition. The PT, led by Lula da Silva, won the 2002 elections shortly after the second WSF in Porto Alegre. The WSF thus indirectly became part of Brazilian history, some WSF initiators from Brazil even becoming iconic figures for activists worldwide. The WSF also positions itself as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, seen as a symbol of neoliberal control. The interweaving of these five reference points— alter-globalization movements, Porto Alegre, Brazilian history, the World Economic Forum, and the founders' biographies—contributes a profound and triumphant significance to the WSF's narrative that extends beyond individual events. Through varying emphases on these reference points, the WSF story can be told in multiple ways, although these different approaches also combine in a collage that creates a vibrant and collective narrative. This 'narrative web', marked by five central reference points, allows for alterity within a shared identity framework.

Such a common framework also manifests in the forms of depiction within the dispersed network of social forums. The WSF bureau website remains continuously online and serves as a prototype for social forum websites. Often, social forum websites include hyperlinks directing visitors to the bureau's site, which has become a

central online connection point for the network. Although it is not obligatory for social forum organizers to embed links to the 'original' WSF website, doing so makes a single event visible as part of a much larger transnational social movement. This hyperlinking also enhances the importance and legitimacy of individual regional, national, or local social forum events.

Moreover, most websites refer to or even include the WSF charter on their pages. The WSF charter acts as a rulebook for organizing a forum. However, since in a decentralised movement there are no sanctions for breaking the rules, some emerging social forums exceed the charter's guidelines, for instance by making political demands, focusing on specific protest topics beyond neoliberalism, or inviting politicians to forum events.

Despite the lack of sanctions for diverging from the original focus of the WSF, the WSF charter remains a mechanism—albeit a weak one—to distinguish between events that are genuinely part of the movement and those that are not. The WSF's literature suggests that a movement does not construct a common identity by radically distinguishing itself from its environment, but by pursuing inclusion.

In fact, in the case of the WSF, the aim appears to be a blurring of the boundary between itself (the system) and its environment. The primary goal of the WSF is not exactly to dissolve its bounds entirely, but rather to expand and integrate its environment, such that a distinction between that environment and it, becomes less pronounced. I base this framing primarily on a content analysis of self-descriptions on event websites. My empirical thesis is that social forums view themselves as 'islands of utopia' where one can retreat and observe the world from a different perspective. More importantly, these events allow participants to experience a better world. The only common assumption among all participants is the belief that the current world is flawed and needs change. This explains why there is no specific political claim in the self-descriptions, but instead a vague goal of achieving a better world on a small scale, at an (ideal) WSF event. The goal of the WSF is not to create a better place at a single event but to spread this improved vision globally. In theory, then, the movement only achieves its end stage once these 'islands of utopia' have maximally expanded, and the entire world has become a social forum.

In conclusion, I argue that the concept of autopoiesis only partially captures the construction of a common identity within a social movement. Autopoiesis, originally developed by biologists Maturana and Varela (1980), refers to the self-sustaining and self-replicating nature of systems that maintain their structure and function independently. In the context of social movements, it suggests that movements can sustain themselves through internal processes. However, this concept does not fully account for the dynamic and evolving nature of collective identity, which often involves external influences, interactions, and ongoing adaptations that go beyond mere self-replication. Not only are the boundaries between the movement and its environment blurred, but the movement also seeks to expand until it becomes the new world society it envisions. This process is not comparable to a model of expansion from a single central point to the outer world. Rather, it is a decentralized process, with social forum events continually emerging and disappearing globally. Each social forum recreates its own identity in conjunction with a broader vision of what the essence of a WSF is. This can best be analytically understood as transpoiesis: a process of predetermined rupture and simultaneous sealing; a process of poiesis characterized by

deconstruction and reinvention of identity. It is also a process that reproduces the unmistakable identity of the movement.

In summary, constructing the movement's identity involves maintaining the tension between constant reinvention and corporate identity until it either fades into obscurity or results in another (social forum) world. Transpoiesis is the theoretical model that captures this ongoing recreation (poiesis) while preserving the movement's roots and overall identity.

4.2 Mechanism 2: holding together the different parts of a movement—between horizontal and hierarchical organization

In developing the argument based on my ethnographical data of the WSF, I will show in this section that the movement's organizational structures are characterized by rupture and restart, similar to its identity construction. Since the concept of autopoiesis does not fully capture the discontinuous nature of the WSF's structural work, I propose using the concept of transpoiesis to describe the unique mechanism of organizing without becoming a formal organization.

The WSF perceives itself as a horizontal social movement, and its charter formally prohibits leadership. Consequently, it is crucial for members of the movement to prevent tendencies toward formal leadership. However, as discussed at the beginning of the paper, a movement relies on at least minimal structures of organization. For the WSF, there is a group of individuals (primarily at the local level) who organize social forum events and an International Council (IC). The IC, with approximately 160 members as of 2011, is the main body of the WSF, consisting of representatives from movement networks, NGOs, and labor parties worldwide.

IC members primarily identify themselves by factors such as origin, age, or gender, rather than the networks they represent. This results in a structural imbalance in representation that could only be rectified if every group and nationality were represented in the IC. This imbalance ensures the IC's legitimacy in continuing to expand, and in reaching the goal of a politically correct representation of the outer world within the system (until the system itself becomes the world). Consequently, the IC is not primarily a decision-making body but rather a connector of various social forum organizers globally. As a binding element between events, the IC helps reproduce the WSF as a transnational movement. However, there is a risk that such a body could centralize and eventually become a formal decision-making structure, transforming the WSF into a formal organization. I have identified two principal processes within the IC that act as a check against this trajectory. The first prevents the emergence of leadership positions, and the second maintains the IC's role as a non-centralized body within the WSF movement.

4.2.1 Alternating between informal and formal (re-)structuration

The first process reflects a general aversion to formal structures, a common theme in social movements (Paslack, 1990). Within the WSF, informal structures often develop that concentrate power in strategic decision-making, such as deciding where the next WSF will be held. I refer to this as an 'inner circle', following Freeman (1972). This inner circle, which emerged from the beginning, has wielded significant influence within the IC. Some new IC members proposed a

counter-reaction to the informal, powerful inner circle by suggesting the implementation of formal structures, such as a liaison group, to replace informal authorities with rotating, elected representatives. This attempt to introduce formal structures aimed to prevent the WSF from descending into a "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1972).

However, the introduction of official structures was viewed by IC members as a step toward a formal organization. Consequently, members resisted the proposed structure by putting together an informal coalition. The liaison group was proposed at the 2007 IR meeting in Nairobi to improve communication between groups and members of the International Council (IR) of the World Social Forum (WSF). It was intended to facilitate coordination and support between the various organizations involved. However, despite some members being nominated to this group, they were largely from the informal coalition opposing formalized structures. As a result, those nominated were not inclined to perform the liaison group's intended functions, limiting its effectiveness. This counter-reaction against formal structures blocked their ability to execute tasks. This pattern of alternating between the creation of formal structures and their subsequent subversion has occurred multiple times within the IC. Formal structures like liaison groups, commissions, or criteria for WSF hosts have often been ignored or questioned by participants.

In summary, the WSF experiences an alternation between the implementation of formal structures, which reveals informal power dynamics, and the emergence of informal processes that subvert these formal structures. This process of organizing an organizationless organization is best described by the concept of loose coupling, which explains the simultaneous existence of connectedness and autonomy (Das, 1984). Loose coupling examines the interplay between tightly coupled and decoupled structural elements within a system (Orton and Weick, 1990). The main question is: what are the organizational mechanisms behind the couplings and decouplings within the architecture of a movement? Within the IC, relationships between people become tightly coupled into structural elements such as the inner circle. However, these elements often need to partially decouple and reorganize in different configurations. In this interplay of informal subversion and formal structuration, the WSF oscillates between the extremes of structurelessness and formal organization.

4.2.2 The dynamics of initiatives between autonomy and connectedness to the WSF

The second process preventing the development of leadership involves the dynamics of initiatives within the WSF framework. At IC meetings and beyond, actors cluster in initiatives to organize various aspects of the event, such as streaming IC meetings online, constructing websites, or providing translation services. These initiatives often arise from practical problems and are characterized by their own autonomous organization. Wenger et al. (2002) describe such structures as "communities of practice" or "communities of interest." The core features of these communities include:

- Structures that develop organically from the initiative of actors, rather than being imposed by the organization itself;
- Voluntary engagement;
- View their work as their own practice.

In the WSF context, different initiatives work on similar issues without necessarily coordinating or being aware of each other. Additionally, a

general 'forgetting' of pre-existing structures facilitates the repetitive restart of initiatives addressing what are perceived as 'known' problems by seasoned members. The WSF relies on this dynamic, which allows anyone to join or leave without centralized control or sanctions. While most initiatives disappear shortly after an event, some develop their own structures and become increasingly independent from the WSF. An example is the 'World Forum For Free Media', which began with concerns about communication and media coverage of WSF events. This group has developed its own political agenda (e.g., communication as a human right), organized thematic social forums, and created an official charter for its network.

It is noteworthy that such self-developing initiatives have not yet separated into distinct entities. Instead, they continue to view themselves as integral parts of the WSF, and are recognized as such by others. This balance between connectedness and autonomy ensures a continuous dynamic of initiatives and prevents any from becoming too disconnected from the WSF. Conversely, when informal or formal modes of steering appear to risk institutionalizing the organization, the movement addresses this either by subverting formal structures, or by processes that aim to formalize informal power dynamics. This balancing act helps avoid the typical transformation of the movement into a party or an NGO and prevents a "tyranny of structurelessness" (Figure 3).

Nonetheless, this organizational process is fundamentally characterized by rupture and restart. The movement's organizational structure operates as an intermittent process of organization, which does not entirely drift away or lose coherence but maintains a balance between fragmentation and institutionalization. The concept of transpoiesis captures this intermittent process of organizing. It accounts both for the thwarting of centralization by attempts to undermine the establishment of formal or informal power structures (poiesis), and the prevention of excessive decentralization that could lead to fragmentation.

4.3 Mechanism 3: dealing with resource flows from outside and within the movement—between reality and ideals

Ideals and visions of a better world are a driving force within social movements. To put it bluntly: ideals are to social movements

FIGURE 3
Between conformity and ideals.
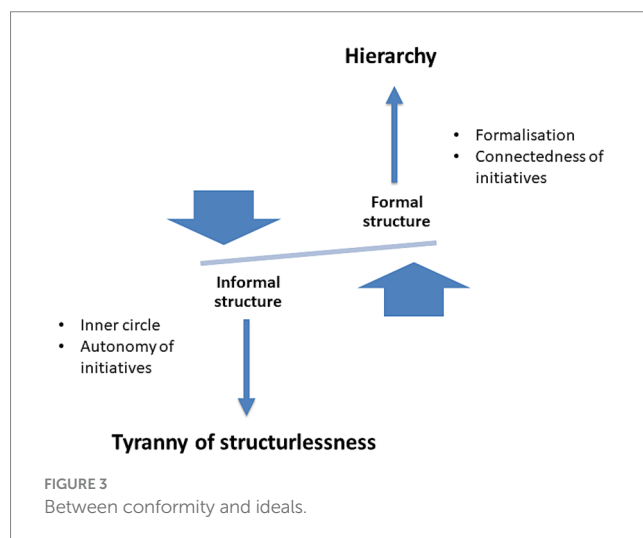
what money is to formal organizations. Both ideals and money motivate people to pursue broader objectives by performing organizational tasks. However, neither ideals nor money are exclusive to social movements or formal organizations; both are also involved in organizing protest events.

The success of a WSF event hinges on the number of participants and their engagement. The investment of personal resources—whether time or money—assumes that activists find the WSF's ideals and its critique of neoliberalism relevant, or at least value the experience of participating in the movement. While the movement aspires to a horizontal form of collaboration, distinguishing itself from traditional, centrally managed events, financial considerations remain significant. A WSF event can cost up to 7 million USD, and funding comes from donors, governments, and corporations. Over the years, financial support has dwindled, making the discussion of financial matters unavoidable and leading to conflicts, particularly during the preliminary organization of an event.

Ideologically, the WSF positions itself as a critic of neoliberalism but simultaneously depends on financial resources. This creates a persistent conflict between the movement's ideals and its practical realities, as it often finds itself operating within the capitalist world economy it criticizes. To avoid letting financial concerns dominate, WSF actors develop practices to minimize the impact of money on the organization of events. A strategy of conflict avoidance, however, often leads to a lack of transparency regarding financial resources and their origins. Within the International Council (IC), financial issues are frequently dismissed as "neoliberal talk" and suppressed to prevent conflicts about resource distribution from surfacing.

During IC meetings, the WSF projects an image of minimal financial means but high levels of member engagement. A low-budget, DIY culture is promoted, exemplified by voluntary translation services using makeshift equipment. Poor quality in these services is framed as a characteristic of the WSF's culture, where an ideal world must be created by hand and cannot be perfect.

While personal contributions can partially substitute for financial resources and help prevent conflicts about distribution, this approach is sustainable only to a limited extent. The pretense of an anti-neoliberal, hierarchy-free movement can only be maintained until resource constraints force a reckoning with financial issues. When resources and time become scarce, the organizing committee may need to establish hierarchical structures for pragmatic reasons. The cost of a WSF event, which often exceeds several million dollars, is covered by governments, foundations, and corporations, including the partially state-owned Brazilian oil company Petrobras. This financial dependency risks compromising the movement's ideals of autonomy and horizontality, and is often inadequately addressed in the WSF's self-description. The reality of securing substantial funding and its impact on the movement's ideals is frequently obscured.

Conflicts emerge when the organizing committee must balance the interests of local activist initiatives, which seek financial support and autonomy, with the demands of international partners who require secure and well-managed events. Financial backers, including the host country's government and various foundations, impose high logistical standards, often resulting in the central committee

contracting professional companies rather than relying on local activists. This can exclude local initiatives and lead to disputes over financial distribution.

Such conflicts typically result in the centralization of resources and power, making it difficult for informal counter-movements to resist formal and informal centralization (see mechanism 2). Consequently, some initiatives organize outside the WSF's framework, sometimes even staging protests or counter-events labeled as the "real" WSF. These conflicts seriously threaten the movement's continuity. However, centralization is generally confined to the duration of the four-day event. After the event, the organizing committee disbands, and a new one is formed elsewhere, allowing for a restart where the ideals of horizontality can be reasserted.

One reason for dissolving the organizing committee after the WSF event is the persistence of underfunding between events, which fosters a culture of low-budget, self-made solutions, and hampers the development of professional and bureaucratic structures. Without financial resources, the transnational movement would struggle to survive. In practice, limited funds affect the ability of all members to attend IC meetings, with representatives from social movements often unable to participate as frequently as those from NGOs. This disparity affects decision-making, as only those present can contribute to the process.

In summary, a balance must be struck between securing sufficient financial resources to meet practical needs and adherence to the movement's ideals. This ongoing challenge requires navigating the tension between idealism and reality, while striving to maintain the movement's core values and address the demands of organizing large-scale events.

The actors within the WSF must negotiate a tension between two extremes (see Figure 4). On one side, they rely on self-organized, low-budget events, while on the other, they confront the logistical and financial demands of managing gatherings with up to 150,000 participants.

The ability to organize without becoming an organization hinges on two key points. First, when financial issues and their distribution dominate, the hierarchical structure of the organizing committee must be dissolved after the event. This dissolution ensures the replacement of the committee with new personnel and recommencement in a different location. This approach allows the movement to continually

FIGURE 4
Doing social movement—between fragmentation and organization.
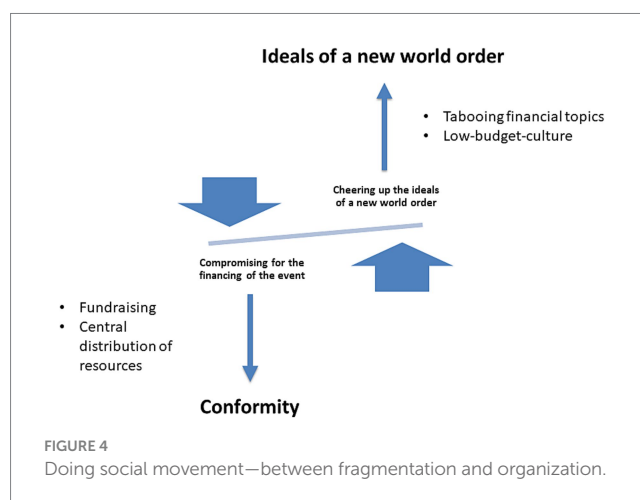
renew its commitment to the ideals of horizontality and its opposition to neoliberalism.

The concept of transpoiesis, which involves intermittent operation, is particularly relevant here. Transpoiesis involves maintaining a balance amid conflicting pressures—between ideals and reality, between individual and global concerns, and between those who control financial resources and those who lack them. By preserving this balance, the movement can prevent the escalation of conflicts and avoid fragmentation, thus sustaining its integrity and effectiveness.

5 Beyond formal structures: transpoiesis and the evolution of organizational learning in a digital world

In conclusion, the comparison between autopoiesis and transpoiesis provides a nuanced understanding of the organizational dynamics within social movements such as the WSF. Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis suggests that social systems reproduce themselves through internal processes and rational goal-setting. While the WSF displays some autopoietic elements, such as its inner circle or organizational committee, its persistent resistance to centralization, and the frequent emergence within it of contra-structural movements challenge the applicability of this framework. The concept of transpoiesis offers a more fitting description of the WSF's organizational mechanics. Transpoiesis highlights the ongoing process of reconstruction immanent to the WSF, as well as the continuous balance it must strike between various elements of the movement, including identity, hierarchy, and resource management. Unlike autopoiesis, which implies a stable and self-reproducing system, transpoiesis does not aim for a final state of stability or closure. Instead, it represents the movement's perpetual engagement with its contradictions and challenges, maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between its ideals and practical realities. Thus, while the WSF embodies aspects of both movement and organization, transpoiesis better captures the essence of its ever-evolving and resilient nature.

Looking ahead, the study of social movements and collective learning processes presents promising avenues for future research, particularly when viewed through the lens of Du Gay (2020) critique of contemporary organizational analysis. Du Gay argues that much of modern organizational analysis has reduced 'formal organization' to a mere social container, neglecting the dynamic and practical aspects of how organizations function. The concept of transpoiesis offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. Unlike autopoiesis, which focuses on self-sustaining systems, transpoiesis emphasizes the continuous, self-organized process of balancing various elements. It involves managing contradictions between identity, hierarchy, and resource allocation, without seeking a final state of stability. This approach aligns with the need for a more nuanced understanding of organizational dynamics, highlighting the ongoing adaptation and reconstruction that movements and organizations undergo to address new challenges, particularly in the digital age. Additionally, transpoiesis provides insight into how collective learning and organizing evolve in response to constant change, emphasizing their emergent and processual nature.

In their systematic review based on 69 empirical studies on social movement learning, Atta and Holst (2023) note that research on the learning processes within social movements is still insufficient to develop a comprehensive understanding of them. Collective learning processes within movements have been particularly underexplored. These processes are evident in the discursive (re-)production, unlearning, defense, and transformation of collective knowledge. To investigate them, Crossan et al's (1999) model of organizational learning provides a useful point of departure, as it relates to processes of knowledge-institutionalization. This model distinguishes between feed-forward processes and feed-backward processes. In feed-forward processes, learning progresses from the intuitions of individuals, through group-level interpretation and integration, to organizational institutionalization. In feed-backward processes, institutionalized knowledge is reproduced and defended against pressures for change (Zietsma et al., 2002).

Through the lens of transpoiesis, examining how organizations and social movements adapt their strategies and tactics based on their experiences provides significant insight into the mechanisms of collective learning. This approach extends beyond evaluating positive outcomes to encompass a broader range of learning processes. It includes shifts in collective knowledge, processes of unlearning, and the defense of existing knowledge. This comprehensive perspective is especially relevant for understanding how organizations, particularly in the digital age, navigate and respond to continuous change. Moreover, transpoiesis underscores how organizations and movements balance competing demands, such as maintaining coherence while embracing flexibility, and negotiating between tradition and innovation. These tensions often manifest in their narratives, practices, and decision-making processes.

Central to this exploration is the role of tactics and narrative. Narratives are pivotal in shaping and reflecting the collective identity and strategies of both social movements and organizations. Research has increasingly focused on narratives since the 1990s, recognizing their role in managing setbacks, challenging opponents, and building collective identities (Benford, 2002). Narratives are dynamic, continuously reconstructed to fit new situations, thereby legitimizing actions and framing goals (Eder, 2011). Similarly, organizations and social movements are characterized by adaptable tactics—forms of action that evolve in response to specific circumstances. The 'practice turn' in social sciences emphasizes the importance of social practices as core components of organizational culture, which evolve through adaptation and reinterpretation (Barnes, 2005). The interplay between narrative strategies and situation-specific tactics reflects broader shifts in meaning and knowledge within both movements and organizations.

Future research should therefore focus on the interplay between strategy and tactics within social movements and organizations, considering their interdependence and analytical distinctiveness. Incorporating the lens of transpoiesis into this analysis provides deeper insight the adaptation of movements and organizations to evolving challenges, particularly in the context of digital disruption. Transpoiesis also illuminates how organizations balance internal coherence with external adaptability, offering a valuable perspective on managing continuity and disruption in an increasingly digital world. This approach is particularly relevant when examining the intersection of digitalization with other transformation challenges such as sustainability and diversity, revealing how organizations and

movements can navigate complexities and maintain effectiveness amid ongoing changes. Moreover, this research could help establish transpoiesis as a theoretical tool, applicable across a variety of contexts, extending insights from the WSF to other organizational and movement-based case studies. The applicability of the framework in a broader context, for instance to decentralized organizations, digital advocacy groups, or micro-level social movements, remains an area for future investigation. Expanding empirical work to test transpoiesis in these areas would contribute significantly to the refinement and wider theoretical development of the concept.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the dataset primarily consists of observation protocols, which are subject to confidentiality and anonymity restrictions. Access to these protocols is limited to ensure the privacy of participants and the integrity of the research process. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Christian Schröder, christian.schroeder@htwsaar.de.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants or participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

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