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## **Time and Management as a Morality Tale, or ‘What’s Wrong with Linear Time, Damn It?’**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Although it seems that time has been actively discussed in the social sciences ever since the sudden proliferation of ‘seminal’ books in the 1960s (Fraisie 1963; Moore 1963; De Grazia 1964; Gurvitch 1964; Sorokin 1964), the 1990s and onwards have quite clearly been a period with an abundant interest directed towards the temporal. It has also been a period when time studies have filtered into popular culture, with a number of books on time selling fairly well to the general public (e.g. Lightman 1993; Gleick 1999; Griffiths 1999). Time has become a ‘topic’, something you might even hear politicians ponder, and the multifaceted nature of time is no longer discussed merely in the halls of academia but in magazines and on ‘Oprah’. And in all these arenas, just as in scholarly writing on the issue of time as a social phenomenon, the consensus is astounding. There is not merely one time, that rigid linear flow of clock time, but a veritable plethora of times and rhythms and flows and what not. In a sense, talking about social time has truly become part of the ongoing moralization that we call culture.

Alfred Gell, who in the general field of time studies is better known for his *The Anthropology of Time* (Gell 1996), has in an essay on barter and gift exchange ironically remarked that there exists a penchant conceptually to organize different ways of economic behaviour according to a simplified and moralistic principle (Gell 1992: 142): ‘“Gift–reciprocity–Good/market–exchange–Bad” is a simple, easy-to-memorize formula.’ Although he goes on to point out that this myopia is being addressed in modern economic anthropology, it is still interesting to note that the inherently critical project of analysing alternative

economic systems can be summarized in such a simple manner. The positing of one aspect of the studied reality as Good and the other as Bad (or at least Worse) seems like the kind of trivial, non-reflexive methodological error an undergraduate would commit. Seasoned research professionals should be immuned to this kind of moralizing in their work, and, if they do choose to moralize for political reasons (as would be the case in, for example, works with an agenda of raising awareness), they supposedly will make their stand an explicit one. In reality, we know that this structure of objectivity/explicit subjectivity is untenable. For political reasons, research with an agenda needs to present itself as objective, whereas pure objectivity in research as a social endeavour might be a logical impossibility.

Turning to the field of time studies, and specifically to the question of time and management, a similar structure emerges. The origin of this chapter lies in my (later aborted) attempt to write a book on temporary organizing, and my later dilemma in trying to come to terms with my own prejudices regarding time. As any reasonably enlightened junior scholar would, I almost instantly became enamoured with the notion that the 'normal' way of viewing the temporal was insufficient and quite possibly a capitalist conspiracy. Somewhat later, though, I experienced what can best be described as an epistemo-existential crisis. I realized that I was capable of regurgitating the party line regarding the ills of linear time on cue, but I really did not know why linear time was bad. Unconsciously I seemed to have bought into the following, a version of Gell's 'easy-to-memorize formula':

Linear-homogeneous-capitalism-Bad/Circular-heterogeneous-critical-Good

The problem was, and still is, that I have no real proof that 'heterogeneous chronological codes' (Clark 1990) are superior in any way, pragmatic or epistemological, to the old-time religion of a linear and uniform time. Sure, quite a few excellent studies have been conducted where heterogeneous times have functioned as a perspective or variable (e.g. Whipp and Clark 1986; Das 1987; Dubinkas 1988). Sure, people will listen and frequently pay for lectures and consultations where the ways of a homogenous time culture are maligned. And, importantly enough for a junior scholar, it is far easier to get 'temporally sensitive' material published, making linearity-bashing a viable career move. But, even though these are excellent points, they do not address the issue. The fact that one can live a good life and have a fine career with/on the conviction that linear time is Bad does not say anything about linear time as such. I can easily find quite brilliant studies that care not a whit for the pluralistic nature of the temporal, and, although it is a logical tautology that a study of heterogeneous time codes must pay attention to time, there is nothing in the adoption of a perspective that proves that this perspective is superior to any other. Unless, of course, we can actually derive some sense of understanding, of 'Aha!'

(Koestler 1970), out of the mere mention and reference to time, which would make the issue a socio-psychological one.

This chapter will deal, therefore, with the issues of how linear time is approached in the study of time and management. I will argue that there is a general tendency towards moralization in these studies, and that linear time in effect stands in for the Villain in their narratives of time. I will further suggest that a more reflexive and less condemning view of 'clock-time' would enhance the study of temporal processes in organizations. In a sense I am calling for a cultural turn, an appraisal of time studies as an academic culture. Thus, this chapter is itself a moral project, a political call for reflection.

### TIME STUDIES AS VIRTUOUS TALES

In their views of time, it may be perhaps that ancient cultures were more sophisticated than we are today. For example, Minoan society upon the island of Crete developed a culture in which there was an aversion to the straight line. . . . The Minoans had an ethics of geometry (Lachterman, 1989) which reflected a belief in 'life after life' where the 'sleeping' dead were buried in the foetal position. Arguably, this shape is not unlike the coiled snake and its potent symbolism for another civilization. (Burrell 1992: 169)

The quote above is from Burrell's 'Back to the Future: Time and Organization', a text that is fairly often referenced in the field of time and management. Dealing with a wide range of issues related to the dimension of time in social theory, it has the Minoans as a recurring theme, and tries to make a strong case for anti-linearity. Instead, it argues for a 'spiral' conception of time, one that combines the direction of the linear with the recurrence of the cyclical. Burrell returns to this theme a few years later with 'Linearity, Control and Death' (1998), where linear time is equated with railroads, which in turn are equated with the movement of armies, war, and the Holocaust. In the first case, the Minoans are portrayed as sophisticated merely through their curious moral condemnation of straight lines, whereas in the second case the possibility to reach death effectively makes linearity a metaphorical evil *a priori*. In both cases, statements regarding the ills of linear time are presented as fact, with little or no argumentation. The ease with which time in general and linearity in particular can be presented as a universally moral issue makes for a speedy argument, and the reader is presented with views that are extremely difficult to disagree with or meet critically. In Burrell's texts, you are basically placed in a position where you feel you cannot be interested in linearity without becoming either uncultured or standing on the side of military aggression or worse. Looking at some other texts on time and social theory, this tendency seems widespread. There is a constant evoking of themes meant to stir up feelings. Burkhard Sievers (1990)

in effect claims that the permanent nature of the modern corporation is synonymous with a lack of understanding with regards to death. In Adam (1995) the first line of the introduction is a quote from a 10-year-old boy: 'When I think about time I think that it won't be long before I am old and die.' Argue against either and you will immediately find yourself apologetic for being such an insensitive clod. Then there is the cultural turn. Levine (1997: pp. xii–xvi) extols the carefree attitudes of his Brazilian students, and seems ashamed of being punctual when others are not. Edward Hall repeatedly refers to Native Americans arguing for 'the other dimension of time' (the subtitle of his book), arguing less than subtly that the time reckoning of the Hopi is more natural than ours (Hall 1983: ch. 2). Argue against them and you might very well feel yourself instantly turning into a bigot and a racist. The reader is encouraged to find her own examples.

Of course, such dramatization might be inescapable in any form of writing. As, for example, Vladimir Propp (1958) and Kenneth Burke (1950) have gone some way towards showing, the act of telling a story, any story, by necessity introduces specific motifs and functions. In order to show that something is worth doing, a Villain and a Goal must be established, among other things. For time studies, being an interdisciplinary field, this brings in a twofold dynamic. In order to show that time studies is worthwhile *at all*, it is necessary to construct an opposition, those who 'take time for granted' (Lee and Liebenau 1999: 1035). In addition, one has to create a starting point internally within the field in order to construct a quest, something to combat, someone to vanquish:

The authors in this collection aim to challenge the linear, rationalist time logic which characterizes management discourses by adopting a contrary view. They emphasize the richness of the temporal dimensions involved and the wealth of competing attempts to order, regulate and control time in the act of managing... The authors reveal how qualitative aspects of temporal relations and practices engage with the rational time economy of management. (From the book proposal of this volume)

We 'challenge', we are 'contrary', and we 'reveal'. It is almost as if we time scholars were a band of guerillas in the mist, coming down upon the establishment like the wrath of God. But at the same time we situate ourselves at the very vertex of thinking, pondering the eternal questions and the foundations of ontology. We are deep thinkers, battling ignorance—a truly romantic tale. But such a tale requires a very specific bad guy. He cannot be too smart, but still powerful. He should at the same time be the Established and something we all know to be contingent. The Linear and his cohorts (the rationalists and the un-reflective) have thus been designated Villains. Such a starting point makes it possible quickly and deftly to create an argument for time as a necessary dimension of reflexivity, giving the scholar a solid foundation from which to continue an argument. Taking a contrary view to linearity might therefore be a necessary starting point for studies on time and management, but it is not an unproblematic one.

### ON THE ETHICS OF TIME STUDIES

It is difficult to find fault with time studies as a field. Few disciplines contain quite as many and quite as varied good intentions. Helga Nowotny (1994) wants to emancipate the individual, helping her to achieve 'a time of one's own'. Furthermore, time studies can in her treatment be a way towards the subversive forms of experience that post-industrial man yearns for. Robert Levine (1997) wants to help bring forth a 'multitemporal society', one where different cultures can understand each other, continuing Hall's project (1983) to show that Western time notions are not superior and may be inferior. Roy (1960) makes a heartfelt case for the creation of meaning in tedious work, showing how 'banana time' can be an act of sedition against the heartless corporation. Simpson (1995) discusses how a more nuanced view of time is necessary in creating an ethics in this technological age. Importantly and timely, Adam (1998) wants to save the environment through a greater sensitivity to 'timescapes'. There is a plethora of work, particularly in the field of time and management, which at least in part tries to show that awareness of different ways to pattern the temporal will bring about greater understanding between men (e.g. Ebert and Piehl 1973; Schriber and Gutek 1987; Dubinskas 1988; R. Butler 1995). And, fittingly, in the literature on management and organization, time has repeatedly been referred to as an important aspect in organizational life, with the implication that enhanced knowledge of time will lead to improvements (e.g. Gersick 1988, 1989; Gherardi and Strati 1988; Blyton *et al.* 1989; Hassard 1991; Ramaprasad and Stone 1992; Das 1993). As can be seen, it is a wide range of (ethical) projects that can be fitted in under the auspices of time studies, fine and laudable attempts, united in trying to improve the (organizational) world through more attention to the temporal.

Now, when we study time and management, we are trying to say something either about how we think organizations should be *understood* or about how we think they should *be* (efficient, responsible, money-making, good). The problem is that with an epistemological category such as time it might not be possible to differentiate between the two. Ian Hacking (2000) has remarked that the notion of things being socially constructed—and I would wish to argue that the analysis of time in organizations and management falls within this category—is at the very least implicitly related to the idea that the thing being studied could be totally different. If time reckoning is 'socially constructed', it could be constructed differently, and an analysis of how we view time might be impossible to disentangle from normative prescriptions regarding how we should view time, and consequently that which is studied through this vantage point. Claiming that there are other temporal dimensions beside the linear time of management and planning is a call for taking these into consideration, a project of raising awareness with definite connections to altering practice. As the notion of time we hold does in fact structure the world around us in a specific way, the neutrally presented 'new' notion(s) must in fact logically be synonymous with

the presentation of a new world. What seldom becomes very clear, though, is whether the authors and time scholars engaged in these projects see themselves as neutral observers just stating facts or participants with their own personal notions of how the world should be. In many cases, the fact that the presented 'new' conceptions of time are put forth in such a manner as to make the authors' wider agenda viable is presented not as a political move, but as statements of science. To present the 'linear time of management' as false or insufficient is synonymous with presenting an alternative, a way in which one thinks organizations should function. More succinctly put: if time structures our world, time studies might never be able to be fully neutral, but are in part an attempt to change the world. Within the field of management and organization theory this tendency becomes even more pronounced, owing to the empirical nature of the field. In addition, this field can itself be described as practical ethics, born out of moral philosophy and concentrating on doing well (ambiguity very much intended).

But is all this a problem? There might be no reason why a discipline could not be based upon an ethics and function mainly through its strive towards the good. From a postmodern viewpoint, it might even be a more excusable strive than the strive towards the truth (cf. Rorty 1979; Lyotard 1984). Within the scope of this chapter the problem is not that time studies functions through moralizations, but that it tries to hold up a front of objectivity in a position where it is clear that a choice of perspective must have at least a moral component. There can in this perspective be no fundamental way to state that linear time is better or worse than say cyclic time, as this by necessity is a moral choice. And, though a moral choice is absolute in the sense that it is by its holder thought to be logical and necessary, this does not mean that it can be held to be global. The research community can very well hold onto its prejudices, but cannot claim scientific objectivity to such claims.

In the case of management, the claim is that the 'normal' stance, where a strictly linear view of time is adhered to, is insufficient, because it hides among other things the lived rhythms of the individuals working under the regime of the clock (see e.g. Thompson 1967; Zerubavel 1981; Adam 1995: 84–106). But what is here meant by 'insufficient'? Logically, it would refer to a case where we cannot fully understand the phenomenon in question from the original perspective—that is, linear time. But what is the phenomenon in question? If it is an organization, the choice of perspective will by necessity alter the observed phenomenon (cf. Maturana and Varela 1980; Morgan 1986). An organization studied through the perspective of heterogeneous times is *not the same thing* as an organization observed with the belief that time is homogeneous. If we are discussing economy in general, the same point stands (Callon 1998). What we *can* say is either that we feel our knowledge to be better, making it a matter of taste, or that our new picture of the organization is better *for some other purpose*. Opposing linear time perspective could be a way to improve working conditions (Perlow 1999), improve the standing of women in the workplace (Forman

and Sowton 1989), or just generally show support for the working man (Roy 1960). But in none of these cases is a clear theory of time necessary, were it not for the fact that it makes the greater argument seem more neutral. What arguments on time in processes of organizing do is that they implicitly make the claim that adopting more perspectives on a subject by necessity results in an improved picture, a statement that lends such adoption scientific credibility. The logic of this thinking is that time is so complex an issue that one cannot handle it with simple categories, and therefore one must want to replace the relatively straightforward idea of a linear time with something more multi faceted. Such an argumentation seems faultless, were it not for the one element missing: power. By redefining the basis of knowledge, time being *the* epistemological category, time studies tries to establish a power relation (cf. Foucault 1973a).

The risk is that, by becoming a discipline, one with its own journal (the admittedly excellent *Time and Society*) and more conferences than one can shake a moderately sized stick at, time studies are frightfully close to becoming Theory and, in this process, prescriptive. By presenting the 'time of management' as wrong *a priori* and 'attention to time' as the way to right this wrong, one easily falls in the trap of presenting dogma as research, preferences as science. Marx (1867/1976) needed to create a view of time in capitalist society that would make his thesis regarding the oppression of the proletariat feasible, and accordingly presented the case of working time under industrialism in the manner he did. Still, however pleasing we find the argument (I happen to find it tremendously attractive), it never does anything besides presenting *another* view of time. He does, naturally, argue that this is the *correct* view, but fails to notice that it is so only because it is in line with his ethics. The result: a cadre of devout believers who are unable to adapt the theory to contextual changes (cf. Guillet de Monthoux 1983). Likewise, at the moment at least, the prescription of time studies can be summarized in the simple formula I began with: Linear-homogeneous-capitalism-Bad/Circular-heterogeneous-critical-Good. This is the Theory, and, if time studies cannot escape this, it will lose much of its own dynamic. It will become a Keeper of the Flame, and time studies might degenerate into mere jargon. As Walter Nash argues in *Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses*, theory can simultaneously be 'shop talk' whilst moving towards 'show talk', a way of impressing the notion of unassailable truth upon the uninitiated. If time studies can muster the same degree of reflexivity towards itself as it demands from other disciplines, much would be won.

What this would entail, though, is a certain humility on the part of the individual researcher. I started the writing of this from a simple question: 'Why does everybody hate the linear so?' The answer is: 'They don't.' But the moralizations inherent in the study of time and management create the field in such a way that certain prejudices become entrenched and certain discourses are taken as true *a priori*. Statements such as 'time is socially constructed' are part and parcel of this approach, discursive titbits that are rarely thought through since they correspond with the world view the community of time

studies holds on to. This world view makes up a culture, and the possibility to analyse time unaffectedly is made impossible, and may be moot, by the boundaries drawn up by such a culture. Still, to be a researcher takes a certain reflexivity towards ones own biases. To retain epistemology without abandoning the ethics would demand that researchers make their dispositions known, instead of treating (or worse, masking) the analysis of time and management as a field for objective and dispassionate study. Openness to the necessary ethical element of epistemology might enrich the study of time, and at the very least it would lessen the self-importance thereof.

As a further observation, if we were to take time wholly seriously as an objectively approachable issue in the writing of management and organization theory, we would in addition come up against a major problem: that the temporal does not respond well to theorizing. Any statements we make within the language game of theory automatically make our statements about time seem fixed and static, and therefore lack temporality in their reflection. This can be seen, for instance, in the history Hassard (1996) writes with its rigid ordering of metaphors. Also, any more plural approach is quickly subverted by the inherent linearity of writing, something that can be discerned in Burrell's texts where the argument for less linear perspectives are presented in a clear, coherent, and very linear way (although Burrell's *Pandemonium* can be read as a valiant attempt at perverting the linearity of argument). And, even if we were to pass these hurdles, the problems presented in the beginning of this chapter make themselves known. To think that the question 'What is time?' can be answered is a fallacy. To make statements beginning with 'Time is...' is a continuation of this fallacy. Time can never be approached in this fashion, simply because any and every attempt to define time leads us into a recursive and everlasting spiral of definitions and their definitions. This holds for typologies as well as matrixes, for plurivocalities as well as clear-cut attempts at definitions. Any and all of these are based on the idea of a thing-out-there as well as on the possibility to catch the temporal and fix it to a page. And this notion creates a foundation from which time studies can be projected as a scientific endeavour.

### LINEAR APOLOGIES

So, why not instead take a step back, and assume that time, to a great degree, is just as it seems to be, a rather homogenous flow in one direction only, measurable by clocks and calendars? It seems that the hardest thing to do for a scholar is accepting that a thing sometimes might be just as it appears, or, in the harsher words of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself'. In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein ponders this particular problem, how people try to study things like time by defining them and creating taxonomies. But, he says, most things cannot be contained in such devices. And

thinking that the lack of clear meanings for words and concepts is a deficiency or a call for research is like saying that the light from my (Wittgenstein's) reading lamp is no real light at all, simply because it lacks clear boundaries. Similarly, I find little to be gained from saying that the notion of linear time—which, after all, we (also) live with and usually experience little difficulty in doing so—is faulty just because things get fuzzy at the edges.

We could infer that, on the whole, the field of time studies takes itself far too seriously, and that the epistemology of time studies could be enhanced by irony. Here I refer to the work of Richard Rorty (1989, 1998), who has repeatedly argued that, in order to develop a thinking that can handle the complex, ambiguous, and often paradoxical nature of human social existence, one needs to adopt a stance he has called *ironical*, the opposite of which in Rorty's parlance is *metaphysics*. An ironical thinker never takes her set of basic beliefs as eternally true, but is able to question them simultaneously and work with them. In time studies there exists the implicit basic belief that their role as a discipline to a great degree is that of questioning and critiquing linear and homogeneous views of time. As reasonable as this sounds, particularly within the culture of time studies, it does not follow that this is the only possibility for developing theories of time. In the field of business studies, there is the implicit notion that the role of such studies lies in the improvement of organizations, by making them either more efficient or more humane. But, as reasonable as this also sounds, there is no logical reason why this should be the aim. It is only if we take the scholar's greater project into consideration that such steps become sensible. Choosing to do so we have accomplished and accepted the pragmatic turn, and can in the tradition of American pragmatism concentrate on developing theory that accomplishes what we *want* to accomplish, creating theories that should be analysed through what they do instead of an assumed universal truthfulness. But this takes irony, for then we can no longer pose as neutral thinkers, merely stating facts. Neither can we then claim that linear time is a faulty way to view time, merely that it is insufficient for what we wish to do through time studies. Then linear time will finally be free.

I have at the beginning of this chapter put forth the argument that linear time has got a bad reputation, and that this well-meant bias may even have hindered time studies. But by this I do not mean to criticize the work done in the study of time and management. My aim is not to present a new dogma. Rather, I would like to exhort students of time to become aware of the multifaceted nature of their projects in the same manner they/we are trying to make other people aware of the multifaceted nature of time. When it comes to the studies I have referred to, in most if not all cases I admire and respect these. They are often brilliant, witty, and thoughtful. But they are never final, not in that they would be able to present a more *complete* picture of time. As Wittgenstein (1973) stated: 'It is not new facts about time that we wish to find. All the facts that concern us are out in the open. It is instead the use of the noun "time" that mystifies us.'

