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afterword

Thick Time

Nigel Thrift
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract. *This paper acts as a commentary on and an extension to the preceding papers. It argues that time can be fully taken into account in organization studies only by understanding temporal fields as processes of progressive practical imitation, in the manner of tarde. this argument is illustrated by considering various management innovations of the past century or so.* ***Key words.*** *cultural circuit of capital; difference; emergence; nonrepresentational theory; time*

These five papers throw down a challenge to management and organization studies, and to the social sciences more generally, as they struggle to find a vocabulary that will encompass the social in motion rather than the social as a group of naturalized categories. They do that rather well, I think, as they multiply a whole set of unfamiliar grounds. I was similarly impressed by these papers' consequent refusal to take the standard categories of time and space as read.[1] Each of the authors sees through the idea that time, for example, has to be one thing or another, and understands that time can be lots of things.[2] Therefore, each paper opens up new possibilities of understanding and practising time differently.

And yet, or at least so I will argue in this end piece, perhaps these papers do not always go far enough. And that is no surprise. The problem of talking time in organization studies arises from the extreme difficulty of capturing the fact that the word summarizes a multitude of unfoldings, all making their way into the world at different rates. No organization is

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present to itself therefore. Each organization depends upon coordinating all these different times but no organization can succeed completely. The reaction to this state of affairs has been of three main kinds. One is to posit an overarching time, which it is assumed is the one that the organization is running to—usually clock time. Another is to try to move the frame of what counts as temporality on by positing, for example, time itself, caught up in a realm of pure becoming, as opposed to the evolutionary flow of things within time, or a non-chronological notion of appropriate time such as *kairos*, which can be opposed to a quantitative or at least metricated time. The final reaction is to argue that an organization runs to a plurality of times (Adam, 2004). This polychronic notion has been attractive to many authors of late (see Parkes and Thrift, 1980).

Each of these reactions seems to me to be unsatisfactory, though each in different ways. The first reaction simply allows one time, having been made immanent, to become the subject of immanent critique. So, for example, we get yet another muddle-headed condemnation of clock time, which often seems to stand in for all the ills of Western civilization (e.g. Griffiths, 2000). With Paul Glennie I have just finished a detailed work that chronicles the history of clock time in England between 1300 and 1800 (Glennie and Thrift, 2005). We found, in contradiction to accounts that insist that clock time is simply a negative tool of discipline, a situation in which clocks allowed all kinds of creative tasks to be carried out that would have been very much more difficult before their advent—from love affairs to gambling (Glennie and Thrift, 2002). The idea of clock time as the harbinger of one way of framing the world was simply wrong, theoretically and empirically: clocks and clock time were a multidimensional presence. The second reaction allows all kinds of philosophical discourses to become regnant but rarely allows much progress to be made in providing an analysis of actually existing organizations, even given the avowed intent to oppose a kairotic notion to a chrono-metric one, with which I am in considerable sympathy. The third reaction is easy to state but difficult to do much with and I have become more and more suspicious of it: its very diversity is its undoing (but see Bluedorn, 2002).

Organizational Time

So what does organizational time actually consist of? In this short commentary, I want to take an approach based on the work of Gabriel Tarde, most famous nowadays for his resolute refusal to explain the social by means of the social, a refusal that chimes with a number of recent theoretical adventures such as actor-network theory and various forms of feminist theorizing (see Alliez, 1999; Barnes, 1948; Latour, 2002; Toews, 2003). In aligning myself with Tarde, I therefore assume that

difference goes all the way down. In other words, I am interested in a conception of materiality that has the following four qualities:

1 difference and association are at the root of things: all things are complex and composite, nothing is homogeneous—'the least corpuscle . . . contains a world of new creatures';
2 contrary to the principle of evolution (for 'evolution itself evolves'), things do not proceed from the simple to the complex but are simply a set of re-creations of multiplicity: to exist is to differ—and it is from this formula that we must begin; thus,
3 it is a matter not of filiations but of reinventions, not of expression but of constitution;
4 there is a panvitalism of the infinitesimal in which all individuals are animate, though to different degrees, which 'constitutes a species of collective meditation with no brain of its own'.

In line with Tarde, I also assume that new things are constantly on the rise that think the world in new ways. Ontogenesis rather than ontology. How things become what they are, not what they are. Finally, I therefore assume that time has to be seen as composed in and of a set of practices (often crystallized in objects) that limit difference and so allow directed action to take place. These practices must not be seen as in some sense reductive, just because they limit action in particular planes. Instead, they must be seen as productive variations, allowing new things to come into the world that add new kinds of weight and energy. They proceed to inhabit the world chiefly through a process of 'imitation', that is, an 'open-ended series of small but specific and irreversible changes . . . many small continuous series of social constitutions without a central subject' (Toews, 2003: 85).

So, for example, it is quite possible to recast that shibboleth, clock time, as a series of small and continuing improvisations, rather than as a set of epochal configurations. In other words, clock time can be thought of as a set of mundane practices[3] that are flexible means of achieving particular goals, and so may be tighter or looser in character according to the demands of the particular situation. Instead of a metrical straitjacket, then, it is a commonly held toolbox of pragmatic shortcuts, made up of particular forms of intuition, some limited forms of cognition, and a relevant array of instruments, some of which may count as forms of thinking in their own right, which are continually developing and reframing what counts as the world. This vision may seem less interesting than the epochal configuration account since it involves all kinds of improvisations around a theme of routine, rather than an absolute frame, whether that frame be regarded as cultural or technical. But it also focuses attention on the mundane stuff of temporal organization, which is responsible for so much of our temporal experience, and, in doing so, opens up a space for politics that goes beyond easy denunciations.

Organizational Timings

Given such a piecemeal vision of time, the problem, of course, is to identify the key practices that can allow organizations to minimally cohere in space and minimally reproduce in time such that they are still deserving of the name. I would argue that this means identifying a minimal number of often prosaic practices that can gradually transduce the world, to use a term from Simondon (Mackenzie, 2002). Such transductions are individuations in process, flashes of the new that have accumulated into commonplaces.

> The term [transduction] denotes a process—be it physical, biological, mental or social—in which an activity gradually sets itself in motion, propagating within a given domain, by basing this propagation on a structuration carried out in different zones of the domain: each region of the constituted structure serves as a constituting principle for the following one, so much so that a modification progressively extends itself at the same time as this structuring operation. (Simondon, 1995: 30)

Prosaic practices are practices that have become common to most organizations at a particular time, whereas new practices spread by imitation as they are perceived/judged to be successful according to prevailing orders of worth. What I am trying to put forward, in other words, is a kind of Tardean viewpoint in which organizations should be seen as constantly changing fields through which imitation periodically sweeps, so producing a pattern of usually short-lived competitive advantage of better mistakes for some firms as other firms' practices are converted into errors. This is not a consoling view for organization theorists, in that individual organizations can usually do relatively little that is certain to improve their situation, since they are caught in a web of co-dependency. In other words, no necessary progress or evolution is taking place in the field of business; rather the field is periodically restructured into a new configuration of profitability, which is, however, nearly always unstable and can nearly always sustain only a certain amount of learning before events intervene and new patterns of learning become necessary.[4] Out of these restructurings, new kinds of economic credibility are established for a period of time (themselves the result of practices of credibility that have also been periodically constructed). And it is in the interplay of these practices of practice and how their worth is judged that the texture of organizational time is constructed, and especially how that interplay sinks into the body as particular senses of time.

The organization of time has, of course, been a fundamental moment in business success over many centuries. Whether this be the time and motion studies of Taylorism of the 1890s or the attempts in the 1990s to produce real-time organizations, I would argue that, at any one time, organizations are made up of a base of temporal practices that arise out of a series of clumped historical inventions. There is not the space to point

to all of these, but the example of two or three taken from the realm of the basic infrastructure of business organization can give at least some sense of what I mean. The first of these is the great explosion of office-related forms of increasing productivity that date from the 1850s to the 1920s, ranging from the typewriter to the prepared form to the filing cabinet, which have been studied in some detail in the seminal work of Yates (1994, 2001). The second is the equally remarkable application of logistical reasoning to the movements of business (and the corresponding rise of the business of movement) from the 1960s on, which worked through a few basic inventions (and especially the container and the barcode in its many manifestations). Then, finally, there is the rise of commercial software in the 1970s, which allowed these two great leaps forward to be systematized (as in the conversion of the ledger into the spreadsheet) and built upon (most notably through the evolution of track and trace technologies such as GPS, wireless and RFIDs, which are now allowing the environment to be 'autonomated'; see Thrift, 2004). Each of these bursts of innovation gave some organizations a chance to shine for a while, but they were soon imitated and, as they became ubiquitous, so they lost their ability to differentiate, unless organizations were able to call on monopoly power to tide them over (Carr, 2004). Some critics will argue that other innovations are less prone to this kind of imitation since they are based on individualistic managerial strategies, except that since the 1960s the so-called 'cultural circuit of capital' (Thrift, 2004)—made up of institutions such as business schools, management consultancies, management gurus and specialized business media—has undergone a meteoric rise. The whole raison d'etre of this autopoietic circuit is gathering and packaging new managerial ideas and making it easy for firms to imitate them. Indeed, in a sense one might argue that the business of this circuit is precisely situated imitation!

Most recently, or so I would claim, many of the most significant organizational practices have been bunched around constructing affect. Indeed, one might argue that affect is a toolbox that organizations are currently rifling with some abandon in an effort to find new orientations to profitability.[5] I want to suggest that three of these riflings have proved particularly important in that they also constitute new ways of working with time. The first of these is the brand. Here the goal is, I would argue, to frame a small space of time at such a basic level that the brand becomes an accepted fact of life, rather than a choice having to be made (Lury, 1999). It becomes an inhabitation that constructs time, rather than a construct within time. The second rifling is associated with the idea of 'community of practice'. Here, the intent is to produce a grouping that constitutes its own knowledge system (Amin and Cohendet, 2004). One of the ways of doing this is by amplifying affect. All kinds of techniques for binding groups together so that they become sources of innovation are being experimented with, many of them dating from the 1950s and 1960s. Such groups can be used to produce the common affective ground that

these communities are thought to require. The third rifling consists of attempts to produce 'on-demand environments' in which the whole of the environment is inhabited by objects loaded with software that can produce an instant response to consumers. A good part of the effort going in to constructing these environments consists of working out how best to obtain good affective responses to these objects, not least because affect is now realized to be a very time-efficient way of transmitting a large amount of information (Thrift, 2004).

Conclusions

What I have tried to show in this brief rejoinder is that organization produces time through a process of gradual individuation of practices that contain within them particular temporal metrics, particular temporal orientations and—in time—particular bodily sensings. We switch into and out of a multitude of these times in our lives and we apprehend those switches through all manner of cues, many of which are evolving descriptions of what those cues are. It is not, I suspect, possible to place a grand framework over these practices. Rather, they are filiations that produce pressures for happening. That means that 'to force the conjunction of a never-ending quest for happening and an ever-accumulating happening of description into something like a believable history or culture is well nigh impossible: theory makes poor theatre, and even the best theatre is poor theory' (Wagner, 2001: 8). That is why, in the end, the discipline of organizational studies is so important—like a few other disciplines, it stands on the cusp between happening and theory at the point where time 'passes us up'.[6]

Notes

I would like to thank the anonymous referee for the detailed commentary on this paper. I have tried to follow the spirit of the well-taken comments without making this piece into the full-blown essay it was never meant to be.

1 And their implicit or explicit call for new methodologies and politics that can take in the continuing flow of invention, intervention and participation as they work to hold out against metaphysical notions of time.
2 But it would have been nice to see more historical work, and more than lip-service paid to the times and spaces of other cultures. I agree with Gell (1992) that these spaces and times can be exoticized: co-locating with another human or non-human presence is a standard experience of all human life. But I am also sure that senses of time and space can vary significantly from culture to culture, as demonstrated most recently by Levinson (2003).
3 Practice is a loaded term in the modern social sciences. There is no space to develop my own take on this term here, but a discussion can be found *in extenso* in a series of my publications, including Thrift (1996) and Thrift (2000).
4 See Stark and Vedres (2004) for a potent demonstration of this process.

5 And which the new sub-discipline of cultural economy is following with interest (see Amin and Thrift, 2003).
6 To use the language of Heidegger.

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Nigel Thrift is Head of the Division of Life and Environmental Sciences, Professor of Geography and a student of Christ Church at Oxford University. His main research interests are in international finance, information and communication technologies, cities, nonrepresentational theory and the history of time. His most recent books include *Cities* (with Ash Amin, Polity, 2002), *The Handbook of Cultural Economy* (co-edited with Ash Amin, Blackwell, 2003), *Patterned Ground* (co-edited with Stephan Harrison and Steve Pile, Reaktion, 2004) and *Knowing Capitalism* (Sage, 2004). **Address:** Division of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3UB, UK. [email: nigel.thrift@admin.ox.ac.uk]