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From Defuturization to Futurization and Back Again? A System-Theoretical Perspective to Analyse Decision-Making

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Introduction

The idea of coping with an unknown future is not a post-modern, contemporary problem; it was the initial ‘trigger’ for the emergence of a modern world that we have experienced for nearly three centuries. The prospect that neither God nor other transcendental forces determine the fate of society but rather the actions of societal members is tightly coupled with the idea of an open future (Koselleck 2004; Luhmann 1976). During this period of modernity, it seems that the organization in particular became the expert in dealing with an open future. The idea that society is not subject to an uncontrollable fate but rather a complex endeavour that can be managed and influenced is related to the idea that an organization is able to realize future ends in a legitimate and, moreover, a rational, efficient manner. For example, Durkheim (1984) saw social-professional organizations as a substitute for lost morals. The more

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prominent example is, of course, Max Weber (1958), who defined bureaucracy as the legitimate form of legal-rational authority. Organizations, at least in their (self)description, seem to be societal places where not only their own but also the future of modern society is decided. Planning and control instruments are developed with the promise to both enhance efficiency and determine the future. 'Scientific management' is the classic keyword. The idea of causal and rational control and of social and organizational engineering decomposes itself in the face of increasing societal dynamics and complexity in the course of modernity. Today, nobody in an organization would believe that rational control and planning can guarantee the realization of planned ends in the future. It is difficult to believe in the concept of rational planning, since the environment and its dynamics seem to be too opaque. Nonetheless, it seems that it is exactly the distrust in classical ideas of planning that enhances the interest in tools and instruments that allows organization to cope with an open and unclear future (Buchanan and O'Connell 2006; Scott 2004). The experience of a complex world does not lead to a decreasing interest in the question of how to organize for the future. From basic ideas of future determination by planning, more sophisticated instruments of strategic planning were developed and continuously refined; for example, forecasting instruments were replaced by scenario-planning and complemented by creativity or trend-research techniques (e.g. Liebl and Schwarz 2010). The future orientation of organizations seems to be unbroken, but the methods of dealing with an unknown future might have changed.

As system theory is a general sociological theory that focuses on the question of how systems emerge, gain stability and change, the question of temporality is at its core. From this it follows that this theoretical perspective provides a productive framework for analysing changes in how organizations or organizational practices relate to time. It therefore bridges debates on how to perceive organizations as a procedural and temporal engagement on the one hand (Hernes 2007; Tsoukas and Chia 2002), and attempts to interpret new temporal forms of organizing (Bakker et al. 2016) on the other. Furthermore, it is a perception that combines process-theoretical thinking but also takes decision-making as its focus to interpret organizing. It therefore also contributes to the line of academic thinking which argues for a

revitalization of decision as the basic notion for organizational research (Ahrne et al. 2016; Apelt et al. 2017), as this enables organization research to both point out its own research focus and show how organizing also affects other social fields.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is twofold:

1. To introduce system-theoretical thinking in general (Luhmann 1976, 1995), with a focus on organization and organizing (Nassehi 2005; von Groddeck et al. 2016). The aim is to provide a framework for empirical research both to analyse organizations as a procedural endeavour in general and to analyse in particular how organizations produce and organize (their) future by decision-making.
2. To illustrate the ability of this theoretical lens through an analysis of the discourse of decision-making, showing how changes in relating to time dimensions correspond with new forms of decision-making.

Introducing System-Theoretical Thinking

Structure and Time

Niklas Luhmann developed his system theory as a critique of theories that presuppose stable structures to explain social action and order. The aim was to build a theory that can explain order as a *process of structuration*. System theory is therefore a perspective that stands in sharp contrast to every theoretical perspective that explains action from the deduction of complex structures. System theory tries to explain the way in which reality structures itself through its own connecting operations: Luhmann is interested in the autopoiesis of systems (Luhmann 2005a). The basic operations that constitute systems are communications. Communications, as basic elements, are events that do not last. They vanish as they have occurred. Luhmann's basic research aim therefore is to explain both the connectivity between these fading events and that its form is neither determined nor arbitrary. His research interest is to clarify how and under what circumstances communications interconnect. He therefore redefined structure as a communicative element that enables

the connection of communicative elements: ‘Therefore we will constrain the concept of structure in another way: not as a special type of stability but by its function of enabling the autopoietic reproduction of the system from one event of the other’ (Luhmann 1995, p. 286). Structures limit the space of possible connections. Structures are expectations that make connectivity more probable by establishing constraints that limit the scope of possible connections and thereby make connectivity more probable. Every communication is both a new event at the present point in time and a connection to a previous event. Events, therefore, do not just occur; they always occur in a structuralized form: ‘The selection of constraints works as a constraint on selections, *and this consolidates the structure*’ (Luhmann 1995, p. 284). Structures do not eliminate contingency but make it ‘manageable’, which is important, as structures never establish clear-cut determination but allow a combination of determinacy and indeterminacy. This is a prerequisite for autopoietic operations; otherwise, a system would stop operating—either out of full determination or out of entropy.

Structures are not elements that last in time, they occur only in an operative, present-based form: ‘(...) structures exist only in a present; they extend through time only in the temporal horizon of the present, integrating present’s future with the present past’ (Luhmann 1995, p. 293). Thus, *structures perceived in this sense make it possible to observe how past, present and future are constructed and how constructions of time constrain the scope of possible connectivity within the system.*

The discussion so far shows that system theory focuses on the present. Future and past have become dimensions that are dependent on the present: ‘In fact, if we have an almost infinite historical past, structured and limited only by our actual interests, and if we have an open future, the present becomes the turning point, which switches the process of time from past into future’ (Luhmann 1976, p. 133). Luhmann’s definition of time rejects an objective idea of time, which perceives past, present and future as modalities in which meaning can transgress over time. For Luhmann, time is ‘the interpretation of reality with regard to the difference between past and future’ (Luhmann 1976, p. 135). In this conception, past and future are only horizons of the present and can never be touched: ‘The future cannot begin. Indeed, the essential characteristic of

a horizon is that we can never touch it, never get at it, never surpass it, but that despite that, it contributes to the definition of the situation. Any movement and any operation of thought only shifts the guiding horizon but never attains it' (Luhmann 1976, p. 140). This means that temporal forms can be perceived only as forms that are based in the present.

To summarize, system theory is a theory which basically tries to answer the question of how the continuation or discontinuation of connectivity is made possible based on the operations of social practice itself, in *the present moment of practice*. The focus on the present directs our observation to the present construction of structures in general, as they integrate time in the present and thereby mirror certain pictures of past and future. This leads to an analysis of how systems, for example, organizations, decrease the scope of future possibilities in the present or how the openness of the future is increased, always dependent on the present structure that limits the scope of what seems to be a suitable future connection. Luhmann speaks of 'defuturization' and 'futurization' (Luhmann 1976, p. 141). In the following, I will show how the notions of defuturization and futurization can be used as a theoretical lens to analyse how organizations relate to both past and future to make sense of the present. Forms of futurization and defuturization can differ, and call for sensible empirical analysis.

Organization, Organizing and the Temporal Dimension of Decision-Making

The general principles of the autopoiesis of systems and their specific usage of time can be transferred to the realm of organization and organizing. Luhmann viewed an organization as a social system that emerges by connecting specific forms of communication: decisions. Perceiving decisions as the basic elements of organizations connects Luhmann's perspective to mainstream organizational theory and sociology (e.g. Cyert and March 1963; Lindblom 1959; March and Simon 1959; Simon 1959, 1961) with their ambition to deconstruct the relation between decisions and outcome as indirect, complex and not causally determined (Brunsson 1982; Cohen et al. 1990; Simon 1959).

By viewing decisions as the basic element of organizational autopoiesis, Luhmann, on the one hand, connected with this line of research while, on the other hand, choosing a more radical perspective. He was interested in how organizations emerge through the connectivity of decisions. The single decision, the decision-maker, or the outcome of decisions are not the starting point; instead, linking decisions make the organization (for this line of thinking, see Andersen 2003; Apelt et al. 2017; Blaschke et al. 2012; Esposito 2013; Knudsen 2005; Luhmann 1964, 2000; Nassehi 2005; Schoeneborn et al. 2014). In this sense, organization is not a stable entity or a formal structural complex, but, as outlined above, a form of practice that reproduces itself through linking decisions. Luhmann described decision-making as a paradox. For him, only principally undecidable questions can be decided (von Foerster 1992; Åkerström Andersen 2003; Luhmann 2005b). This means that decisions must be made in situations in which you do not know which alternative is preferable. Decisions are necessary only if the alternatives at stake are equivalent; otherwise you just calculate the right solution or you just keep acting. The fact that decisions decide undecidable issues suggests that decisions are relatively unstable. After the decision is made, the contingency of the two alternatives is fixed rather than eliminated. The decision can be easily criticized, corrected or improved, as it always conveys the fact that there had been another alternative, and it is this critique, correction or improvement that calls for new decisions and thereby stabilizes the organizational autopoiesis: 'Decision communication functions to absorb uncertainty in the organization, and fixes and attunes expectations. However, new uncertainty is simultaneously produced. It becomes apparent that the decision could have been made differently. Furthermore, new decisions are potentialized when a decision is made. This means that a decision produces new possible connections for future communication' (Andersen and Pors 2017, p. 121).

Here again, connectivity is also guaranteed by structures which, in the case of organizations themselves, are a matter of decision and function as specific premises for subsequent decisions. The paradox of decision cannot be solved but only postponed into the future. Organization from this perspective can never be perceived as a stable or substantial entity, but only as an operative process or an ongoing practice. Luhmann's theory of

organization is therefore a theory of *organizing* and belongs to organizational theories that argue for a process-theoretical conception (Hernes 2007; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). The process of organizing, in this line of thinking, is fuelled by the paradoxical character of decisions. As the paradox of decision can only be postponed by decisions in a present, it produces the need for further decisions in a future present. This keeps the structuration of organizations going.

As noted above, all operations of a system take place in the present. Time is a form of interpretation of reality that distinguishes past and future in the present. For organizations, this is true in an acuminate way:

(...) decision making actualizes an (...) reverse relationship between past and future. From each present the past is observed as *no longer changeable*, while the future is observed as *still changeable*. Analogously, a decision *cannot be determined by the past*. It constructs the alternativity of its alternative from the perspective of 'what might be'; and it constructs it in the present time. However, with regard to future present times, the decision proceeds from the assumption *that it will make a difference whether and how a decision is taken*. In other words, there is no commitment to the (no longer changeable) past, but commitment to the (still changeable) future. (Luhmann 2005b, pp. 88–89)

Organizations are, like every other social system, present-based; however, they also seem to be significantly *future-oriented*. The motivation for decision-making is tightly coupled with the idea that the decision affects the future. This is only possible if the organization develops a memory of both the future and the past, which serves as a structure that functions as a decision premise. This memory is the structural blind spot of the decision, because without a reliance on memory, the distinction of an unchangeable past and a changeable future cannot be made in the present.

Thus, the theoretical perspective as outlined leads to the analytical question of how decisions open up particular pictures of past and future, and how these constructions are used to decide in the present. As outlined above, the idea of futurization and defuturization provides a heuristic to observe how the construction of time dimensions influence the

scope of what seems possible in a particular present practice. The construction of time dimension is an empirical question and it therefore directs the focus of the analysis to the question how these constructions are commonly drawn and how these constructions change.

Illustration: The Change of Decision Semantics

At this point, I want to briefly illustrate how this theoretical perspective can be used for empirical analysis in the realm of organizing. Albeit this framework can serve as an observation lens for every organizational practice, I want to show in the following how the semantic discourse of decision-making can be analysed from this theoretical stance. The underlying methodological idea is that semantics build a reservoir of ambiguous but condensed meaning that goes beyond single practice contexts. The use of language, semantics and concepts builds a reservoir of meanings that establish social expectations of different forms of practice that are considered acceptable and legitimate (Koselleck 1982, p. 410) but do not lead causally to certain forms of practice. They open a space where specific forms of practice are more expectable and plausible compared to others: semantics serve as structures. In this case, I assume that the management-philosophical discourse on decision-making and the semantics that are used in there offer an access to beliefs and semantics, which play a significant role in organizational decision-making at a particular point in time. Semantics can be perceived as structures that build a reservoir of decision premises that can be actualized in a present decision situation. Thus, to understand what it means to organize for the future, the task must be to analyse how these semantic structures serve to defuturize or futurize the present. Moreover, as outlined above, every decision also creates its own temporality and marks a distinction between past and future. Hence, the aim is to analyse the temporal semantics connected with the semantics of deciding within these texts.

By analysing semantics, I follow an analytical strategy that focuses on the exploration of historical shifts of semantics to understand present phenomena and challenges in organizations (Andersen 2011; Henkel

2013; Luhmann 2004; Rennison 2007; Atzeni and von Groddeck 2015). I studied articles on decision-making in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) and *California Management Review* (CMR). I chose these journals as they serve as an exemplified source of mainstream management thought over a long period of time: HBR was first published in 1922, CMR in 1958. The discourse of decision-making in HBR and CMR is therefore used as a source to analyse how common the descriptions are of the construction of time dimensions and the need for specific forms of deciding at a certain point in time. I selected all articles containing the keyword 'decision' and analysed these articles according to Koselleck's approach to discourse analysis (Åkerstrøm 2003). First, I traced the meaning of individual decision concepts by comparing it with counter-concepts in the particular article. Second, I analysed how future and past are constructed within these individual concepts of decision and how this leads to forms of futurization or defuturization. Third, I compared the articles to trace analogies. Approximately 60 articles were analysed.

The reconstruction of the change in semantics of decision-making that follows serves two aims. First, it illustrates how a system-theoretical approach can be used for empirical research in the realm of organization research by reconstructing the relation of time dimensions and forms of decision-making. It thereby introduces an approach which combines a process-theoretical perspective with an organization theory that views decision as the central operating mode. Second, it reveals that futurization of the present has increased over a very long period, whereas in the present both an extreme increase of futurization and an extreme increase of defuturization can be observed. Although the increase of futurization in general might not be all that surprising, the last finding in particular shows to what extent the system-theoretical framework contributes to current research debates on 'future organizing'. It provides a sociological reinterpretation that shows that attempts to prepare for the future, like, for example, the building of dynamic capabilities (e.g. Teece et al. 1997) or scenario-planning and trend-research (e.g. Liebl and Schwarz 2010), do not only lead to a sophisticated future orientation but also at the same time to a concentration on the present. The aim of this chapter is therefore not so much to connect to certain research debates in organization

or management research but to show how the proposed theoretical framework can be used for empirical analysis that provides insights into general shifts of sense-making in organization. It might, however, shed light on blind spots while creating new ones.

Coping with the Contingent Past: The Knowledge-Based Decision

A first glance into the very first publication of HBR reveals that the semantic concept of decision-making was already present at this time. The purpose of the article by Donham (1922) is the promotion of a ‘proper theory of business’ when it comes to important decisions:

Unless we admit that *rules of thumb*, the *limited experience* of the executives in each individual business, and the *general sentiment of the street*, are the sole possible guides for executive *decisions of major importance*, it is pertinent to inquire how the representative practises of business men generally may be made available as a broader foundation for such decisions, and how a *proper theory of business*, to meet the need, must develop to such a point that the executive, who will make the necessary effort, *may learn effectively from the experience of others in the past what to avoid and how to act under the conditions of the present*. Otherwise, business will continue *unsystematic, haphazard, and for many men a pathetic gamble (...)*. (1922, p. 1)

We learn from this citation how the idea of a rational organization that can be efficiently planned is produced by a certain temporal distinction. In the first part of the citation, Donham states that until now, ‘business men’ made ‘decisions of major importance’ based on ‘rules of thumb’, ‘limited experience’ and the ‘sentiment of the street’. The reference to decision-making and the question of what to do to improve the business are clearly in the past. The critique by Donham is not that the wrong temporal orientation of decision-making is being used, but that the manner in which information is drawn from the past is wrong. To cope with present problems and questions, ‘business men’ cannot rely on a limited perspective; they need to ground their decision in a ‘proper theory of business’. Thus, the future here is not the problematic reference. It is just

the continuance based on the decision taken in the present. The future here is a continued present; the distinctive dimension is the past. The past is seen as a reservoir of knowledge which can be used in the right way when theory is applied. The construction of time produces the need for decision-making in the present by distinguishing a contingent past as a reservoir of knowledge and an unproblematic future as the continuance of the present. The decision ends the uncertainty produced by the past and produces a clear future. The effect of this form of decision is 'defuturization' (Luhmann 1976, p. 141), as it works with a picture of an unproblematic future when the right decision is made. This form of decision-making transforms the open future into a fixed form. In organization theory, this form of decision-making was described using the well-known notion of 'uncertainty absorption' (March and Simon 1959).

Coping with a Fast-Changing World: The Decision for Long-Term Success

As we have seen in the previous section, reality was already described as dynamic and rather complex, but after the Second World War, the perception of a changing environment became increasingly dominant. This is again reflected in organization theory. Scott marked this transformation as the 'entry of open system models' (Scott 2004, p. 4). A citation from Schultz's (1952) article on 'Decision-making: A Case Study in Industrial Relations' might illustrate the transformation:

Every organization needs *flexibility* in meeting *new problems* if it is to be *successful in the long run*. Thus, the *restricting forces within a situation* take on great significance. For preventive as well as restorative reasons, analysis of how a confining environment develops and understanding of the nature of such an environment become universally important. (p. 105)

Rather than referring to an uncertain and turbulent past from which an executive must draw theory-based conclusion, this citation refers to the uncertain development of the environment. To cope with 'new problems' that seem to pop up regularly, the environment must be analysed. Therefore, what we see here is still a form of decision that should be made

based on knowledge. The knowledge cannot be drawn solely from the past; instead, it must be combined with an analysis of the dynamics of the present. This indicates a change in the construction of temporal dimension. Whereas in the previous section, drawing conclusions from the past was the problem, the problematic horizon now becomes the present and the future. If problems are not solved adequately in the present, the future present is in danger.

The future loses its unproblematic status and comes into focus. Decisions become decisions about plans as a vehicle to condition the future. With the emergence of planning semantics, it becomes clearer that aligning the organization to keep the future unproblematic requires additional effort. Thus far, we can see that trust in the past as a reservoir for the right knowledge is minimized. The idea that decisions in the present fix the future of an organization is still common, although it is starting to change. The past is still the reservoir for knowledge; however, the methods and techniques must capture the changing dynamics of the environment rather than underlying forces of a certain business field. The future can be fixed if the right decision is made in the present. However, a semantic shift can be observed. The future is no longer a future present but becomes a present future. The future is postponed, and it is described as ‘a long-range’ horizon, which still promises success but the belief that the promise is kept is related to the premise that the dynamics of the past and present environment must be understood and managed in the right way. Not surprisingly, concepts like ‘long range planning’ and ‘forecasting’ emerge during this period (e.g. Wrapp 1957; Ackoff 1970). The dominance still lies in techniques of defuturization, but there are hints—like the idea that ideas matter—that this dominance is slowly changing.

Coping with the Contingent Future: The Strategic Decision

A notable change in the semantics of decision-making can be illustrated by the following citation from the article ‘Scenarios. Uncharted waters ahead’ by Pierre Wack in 1985. In the article, he explicitly questioned the technique of producing a certain picture of the future by interpreting and analysing the past:

Forecasts are not always wrong; more often than not, they can be reasonably accurate. And that is what makes them so dangerous. They are usually constructed on the assumption that *tomorrow's world will be much like today's*. They often work because the world does not always change. But sooner or later forecasts will fail when they are needed most: in *anticipating major shifts in the business environment* that make whole *strategies* obsolete. (...) My thesis (...) is this: the way to solve this problem is not to look for better forecasts by perfecting techniques or hiring more or better forecasters. Too many forces work against the possibility of getting the right forecast. *The future is no longer stable*; it has become a *moving target*. No single 'right' projection can be deduced from *past behavior*. The better approach, I believe, is to *accept uncertainty*, try to understand it, and make it part of our reasoning. Uncertainty today is not just occasional, temporary deviation from a reasonable predictability; it is a basic structural feature of the business environment. *The method used to think about and plan for the future must be made appropriate to a changed business development.* (p. 73)

Here, a new understanding of the future has emerged which is mirrored in a change of semantics: the uncertainty of the future cannot be transformed into certainty by applying adequate planning techniques in the present. On the contrary, the aim is not to reduce uncertainty but to 'accept uncertainty', to accept that 'tomorrow's world' will not be 'much like today's'. The future is not stable anymore; it is a 'moving target'. The past here is described as 'past behaviour' that holds relevant information only in a world without 'major shifts'. However, in times where uncertainty is the 'basic structural feature of the business environment', the past becomes a horizon that will not continue. The orientation of the present decision must be to understand and analyse a future that holds various possible outcomes. The future turns from being a future present into a future future, since we can no longer anticipate what the future will bring. Here, the paradoxical character of decision-making becomes explicit. In the present, the task is to prepare and plan for something that must be treated as not plannable. Decision-making is no longer described in terms of planning semantics. Semantics like the 'strategic decision' and 'risk' emerge accompanied by techniques like 'scenario thinking' (Åkerstrøm Andersen and Grønbæk Pors 2017). Thus, the strategic decision is a decision that operates on the futurization of the present.

Praising Both the Future of the Future and the Feeling for the Present: The Sensual Decision

In recent years, starting around the turn of the millennium, an additional semantic shift could be observed. What we see at this stage is a new semantic conception of decision-making, which, in part, is an escalation of the strategic decision. An organization must prepare for the totally unexpected future. This cannot be done by ‘planning’ or ‘rational analysing’, but by ‘sensing’ in the present how to adapt an organization to an unknown future. This semantic shift can be illustrated by an extract from an article which discusses the use of ‘dynamic capabilities’ (Teece et al. [1997](#)) by organizations as one possible mode of coping with a fast-moving world:

Building better sensing and dynamic capabilities throughout the organization is a powerful way to manage stormy waters with fast-moving currents. (...) Ideally, *sensing and adaptation systems* are less-tailored to the firm’s current capabilities and more to future trends and uncertainties. Even in the best case, much will be missed in fast-changing environments. This means that strategic leaders, rather than systems, will be the last line of defence when unexpected scenarios materialize. The contingent nature of dynamic capabilities as well as the crucial role of leaders both merit greater attention in how organizations can and should adapt when facing deeply uncertain futures. (Day and Shoemaker [2016](#), p. 75)

One of the ideas expressed in this extract is that an organization can build contingent capabilities in the present, enabling the organization to dynamically adapt to ‘stormy waters’ and ‘sense’ the potential of the future. As it is all about adapting to and sensing a future which is completely unknown, the capabilities must in themselves be dynamic. The futurization of the present is actually a futurization of the future. However, as far as the present is concerned, it is clear that even when an organization can build dynamic capabilities, ‘much will be missed in fast-changing environments’. Thus, the sensual capacity of the leader in the very present builds ‘the last line of defence’. Hence, what we see in the moment is actually the disappearance of the explicit semantic of decision-making.

The decision emerges as a description of the need for action in the present by envisaging a future which is completely different from the present. As adaption to this horizon is nearly impossible, much relies on the very present senses of the leader, who seems to be the only one to be able to integrate this futurized future into the present and thereby defuturize it. It seems that the distinction between the present and an immensely futurized future produces a new form of decision-making in the present rather than the distinction of past and future. It is a form of decision that reactivates defuturization by futurization of the future.

Conclusion

What happens when organizations organize the future? From a system-theoretical point of view, this task has always been done in the very present by making decisions. Decisions are operations that build their own temporality. Decisions can only be made when they construct a picture of the past and a picture for the future. Decisions select and actualize a memory of both future and past. The assumption of this chapter is that the actual selection and actualization of certain memories in the actual operations of decision-making is connected to semantics of decision-making that mirror specific time conceptions. These semantics work as premises for the process of decision-making in organizations, not because they transport a concrete memory but because they transport modalities of how the scope of future and past is constrained. The analytical question, therefore, is to explore whether the memories of the time dimensions are closed or open. Regarding the future, this means analysing whether the future in the present is futurized (opened) or defuturized (closed). Thus, to understand how the idea of organizing has changed in modern society, the analysis of semantic changes might be a suitable starting point.

The analysis of a history of decision-making conducted in this study, which used material from the HBR and the CMR, as an influential reservoir of western ideologies of good management and deciding, revealed a shift from past orientation to future orientation. The first form of the semantic concept of decision is the *knowledge-based decision*. Here, the

need for decision arises by pointing to a past that bears the relevant information for decision-making when the right theory is applied. The decision produces the favoured future. The effect of the decision is the defuturization of the future in the present through relying on the past. This semantic form was slowly destabilized by a semantic form, which I called the *decision for long-term success*. The decision should be made based on knowledge, but the knowledge cannot be drawn solely from the past but must be combined with an analysis of the dynamics of the present. This indicates a change in the construction of temporal dimension. The future becomes a problematic horizon. Decisions become decisions about plans to condition the future. This semantic conception still defuturizes the future, although it is decreasing. Thus, the semantic concept of the *strategic decision* manifests the shift from the defuturizing of the present to futurization. Here, the semantic of decision becomes explicitly paradoxical: it is about preparing for something that must be treated as something for which we cannot prepare. On the other hand, since the turn of the millennium, the semantic conception of decision-making can be observed through further increase in the futurization of the present and a new increase of defuturization by emphasizing the sensual perception of the complex present. Decisions are described as *sensual decisions*.

In sum, the aim of the study was to show how the transformation of the concept of decision can be analysed from a system-theoretical framework. The focus point was to show how the meaning of decisions is directly intertwined with the construction of time dimensions. Depending on how the time dimensions are constructed, different strategies of futurization and defuturization (and their combination) are used to legitimate a specific form of decision. In the illustration of the analysis of decision semantics, the purpose was to show how decision semantics have changed, as this provides a hint of how these semantic concepts of decision might influence organizational practice. This is, of course, an abstract and theoretical approach. The results that are indicated here might therefore serve as a general sociological reflection of applied management techniques and, indeed, call for more in-depth research. Nonetheless, the aim of the study was to indicate the fruitfulness of this perspective as it encompasses both a fundamental temporal theory and a diagnostic framework in order to distinguish modes of organizing for the future.

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