



# Time and Organization Studies, and Time Beyond Organization

Organization Studies

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## Abstract

We argue that the more time is being attended to in organization studies, the more it is concealed. The time being concealed is not the time of clocks or the linear passage of past, present and future, it is not the time of temporal structures, and it is not the time of processual flow by which all substance is held as little more than a temporary arrest. In all these understandings time is treated as something available and, potentially, affirmative. Yet it was barely a few hundred years ago that time was considered a force always present and yet always against us. What, we ask, has happened to this time, the time beyond management?

## Keywords

activity theory, aesthetics, ambiguity, critical realism, historical, paradox, philosophy, practice theory, process theories, space, structuration, time

## Introduction

There has been a progressive forgetfulness of time in organization studies. A strange claim perhaps, given that time has recently been the subject of many studies, indeed ‘suddenly, “time” and “timing” are everywhere’ (Ancona, 2002). True enough, from being an arguably neglected dimension of organizational experience and theory (Butler, 1995; Clark 1990), time has become an explicit theme in, and an integral part of, organizational research, especially in practice- and process-based studies (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Yet this newly found interest is premised on the assumption that time remains something to be categorized and managed: we organize time, it does not organize us. And where this organization is identified as going awry, alternate forms are then proposed; the field no longer

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deals in *one time*, there are multiple times and temporalities, each dedicated to explicating, explaining and possibly ameliorating facets of organized experience. If it is true that in organization studies time is suddenly everywhere, then it is because this polyvalent and anthropomorphic *time-for-us* enjoys unparalleled ascendancy. What we have forgotten in this speculative rush to categorize is time-beyond-us, or just time.

Before this forgetting, barely a few centuries ago, we served time, it did not serve us. Time was considered the reality under which human beings ultimately suffer most and most deeply. To paraphrase Michael Theunissen (1991, p. 42), we encountered time as a primal reminder that we, aswirl with things, exist but briefly under the eye of eternity. Many of our sundials still carry Latin engravings – *memento mori* – reminders, perhaps, that our birth points to one, always present end: we are always in the company of ruins (De Cock & O’Doherty, 2017).

So, what happened to this rule of time? And just as importantly: whatever became of resisting time, which until a few centuries ago constituted the only authentic and truthfully human recognition of its forceful, singular reality? The brief answer to this question – which we will seek to elaborate on here – is that after enlightened, industrial development, after the death of God (the only being who could not die), humans danced to their own time, insulated by the organization through which they assumed dominion of the world. Organizations were no longer places of waiting for fate to have its say. They became places of action, and with the wash of all this activity came a progressive forgetfulness of an unmanaged and ungovernable time. Instead time was subjected to classifications, that in turn served pragmatic human need: time was unfolded through plans and plotted through prediction, and in being made available to managerial practice it became the rack upon which to stretch the world. Sundials became anachronisms. New technologies, no longer so mysteriously and obviously dependent on what was beyond them, mediated conditions of organizational control in which time, rather than being a reminder of the limits to organization, became unconditionally affirmed as the condition of its possibility.

In the following, we want to consider how it might be to think time anew, and to reinvigorate an interest in time that is not *for-us*. To do this, we argue, we must adopt a wholly different approach than the one dominating organization studies today. Falling in step with its broader institutional setting, organization studies continues to forget time because it continues to ask *what* time is, and then provide answers: time is a measured scale indicated as a t-axis, or time is the temporal ordering of habit, or time is sedimented as stored and retrievable memory, or time is possibility. A *wholly* different approach asks *how* time is, rather than *what* it is: how it appears in human experience, in private moments. This is a sensory and affective concern as much as it is one of definition. It is the everyday and sometimes difficult sense of *encountering time*. We actually have a quite developed micro-vocabulary for encountering time, but it gets smothered by conceptualization, and to conceptualize is to look down on time somehow, with the posture of a position. Think of waiting, for example: we can find time is ‘creeping’, ‘lagging’, ‘dragging’, even experiencing the boredom in which all the complexity in the world is reduced to one, cosmic tautology: ‘everything it is always the same’. Or think of stress, when ‘I have no time’: rather than being a quantitative assessment open to remedy through more effective management, this can equally be just a hauntingly qualitative statement. Or think of encountering, suddenly, our middle age: it might just hit us starkly how ‘quickly’ life has run on, as though it had its own will, set against us, blankly, eliding the organized regularity of the calendar days by which the maturing of a life ought to be a predictable and ordered affair. In these experiences the affective dimension time is never plural in form, it is simply time as it is experienced in small moments where we are least visible to others, time with its own reality, indifferent to us, even as it exerts its force.

Such everyday experience should remind us that time is not simply *for-us* – perhaps even, as we will argue in this essay, that it is ultimately *without-us*. It should also remind us that its reality is so

inextricably woven into to the murmur and vague humours of everyday experience that conceptual abstractions serve as much to conceal as reveal its nature. Perhaps of all phenomena time is the most resistant to the smoothing effect of concepts, and to the settlements of pragmatic response: back to the rough ground, back to *how* time is felt as an imperative condition, one which is, surely, the time with which we are most intimately familiar and so a time that deserves our attention, were we able to content ourselves with descriptions of time, rather than theoretically thinking ourselves ‘on the outside’ so to speak, before the beginning and after the end, always wanting to organize ourselves so as to offer theoretical and practical solutions to recover from the dislocating effects of time. We can still organize for this time, but not manage it. The Swedish poet Thomas Tranströmer (1966) puts it neatly. He is writing in the still aftermath of a car accident, considering how, now, to live, having come so close to death, how to live in a world in which people seem always to be watching one another, always queuing at doors, a world against whose ordering hum people ‘split up among themselves the sky, the shadows, the grains of sand.’ The answer: ‘I must be alone/ten minutes in the morning/and ten in the evening/ – Without a plan.’

In what follows we trace the passage of how time is configured in organization studies. Rather than beginning in metaphysical discussions, most studies think themselves into the outside of time by rounding on clock time, often used as a proxy for objective time. Once posed, the utility of clock time is considered, then its corrosive effects, prompting considerations of how it can be improved upon, supplemented and resisted by alternate forms of time, all of which serve to yet deepen an organized immersion in *time-for-us*. We then turn to an exploration of what we call *time-without-us*. This time, we argue, is characterized by its appearing in our experience in ways that, ultimately, cannot be affirmed through organization, but certainly acknowledged (as Tranströmer does in his ‘programme’ of 10 minutes, twice a day). We conclude with a summary of our critique.

## Time-for-us I: The Outrage

On 15 February 1894, Hubert Hall Turner, Chief Assistant of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, wrote the following in his working journal: ‘A dynamiter anarchist was blown up with his own bomb in Greenwich Park. See special Reports.’ In our current time, a time of suicide bombers and terrorist attacks, the events leading up to the Chief Assistant’s laconic observation may not strike us as extraordinary. But in late nineteenth-century London, even though the ‘attack’ failed to kill anyone bar the perpetrator, the bombing was referred to simply as ‘the Outrage’. News reports of the blast wallowed with almost ghoulish delight in graphic descriptions of the anarchist’s injuries, mixed with displays of *Schadenfreude* at his (untimely) death. Citizens were shocked, but also intrigued: what had this man had been trying to do?

The man was Martial Bourdin, a 26-year-old Frenchman, allegedly a member of a group of anarchist tailors in Paris called *L’Aiguille* (The Needle), who, after lunching just off Fitzroy Square, took the tram from Westminster Bridge to East Greenwich, arriving at 16.19. On entering Greenwich Park some 20 minutes later, as a witness observed, he was holding a brick-sized package in his left hand. From here, he followed a zigzag path leading upwards through the park to the Observatory. At 16.45, two assistants to Turner, Mr. Hollis and his colleague Mr. Thackeray, who were both working in the Observatory’s Lower Computing Room, were startled by a ‘sharp and clear detonation, followed by a noise like a shell going through the air’ (Royal Museums Greenwich, 2017). Hurrying out, they saw a park warden and some schoolboys gathering around a figure crouched on the path some distance below the Observatory wall. Running to the scene, they found the park warden holding Bourdin, mortally wounded. The man was missing his left hand, his entrails spilling onto the gravel, with blood and bone fragments spread over a distance of nearly 60 yards. He

was carried to the nearby Seaman's Hospital, where he died 25 minutes later, having said nothing about his intentions, or who he was.

At the time of the bombing, several theories on his motives were circulating, but one especially stuck. On 1 November 1884, Greenwich Mean Time was adopted universally at the International Meridian. As a result, the International Date Line was drawn up and 24 time zones created. Located on the First Meridian, at exactly zero degrees longitude, the Greenwich Observatory was a prominent public building, the place from which all time throughout the British Empire and, beyond it, the world, was measured and regulated. It had become the grounding Ur-Clock, the point from which the piston-line, in-out regulation of human life was being ordered, and Bourdin, it appears, as incredulous as it sounds, was attempting to blow it up. He meant to cure humankind of the time to which it had become a creeping addict.

Many might find sympathy with Bourdin's grievance. In organization studies the prevalence of clock time has been found to afford an irresistible ordering and dividing of the labour process, and thus a powerful tool primarily serving the managerial prescription of organizing to do more with less (Adam, 1992; Hassard, 2002; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). There have been many attempts to challenge and supplant the hegemony of clock time with more humane alternatives. In their study of leadership, for example, Bluedorn and Jaussi (2008) suggest clock time, while important, acts as an 'intellectual straitjacket' when understanding time. They advocate that theorists and empirical researchers develop 'temporal imaginations' – other ways of conceptualizing time. A similar point is made by Ancona, Okhuysen and Perlow's review (2002) in which types of objective time (clock time, event time, life cycles) are distinguished from social constructions of time. Shipp and Fried (2014) continue this line of thought by defining time as subsuming both an external (physical) process that regulates our lives by influencing scheduling, cycles/rhythms, duration, and a personal (psychological) process and flowing property shaped by personality and norms. What is so uniquely human about the latter is its taking on richer, subjective meaning beyond the apparent objectivity of clock time. Such analyses elucidate an objective-subjective dichotomy of time, a distinction between something like 'good' experienced time(s) and 'bad' clock time.

And yet, as always, things are somewhat more complicated. For no sooner is an objective-subjective dichotomy of time proposed, it comes undone. First, there is the problem with the 'objectivity' of clock time. Especially in organizational studies of time, there often appears to be a somewhat muddle-headed conflation of clock time with the time spoken of in physics, and thus objective time. But clock time is neither Newtonian time, nor its successor, relative time. Rather we have created clock time to help us get on in our lives; indeed, one just has to consider heavily scansioned 'orders' such as monasteries or production lines, to see that organization by the clock is almost peerless as a social and technologically mediated form of organizing. Second, clock time – as indeed it appears to have done to Bourdin – functions as a kind of synecdoche for all that is wrong with Western civilization in general and with its organizations in particular. As both Gregg (2018) and Glennie and Thrift (2009) have suggested, this is a grave misrepresentation. We cannot just blame the clock. The mechanized cogs pounding human souls to indistinct, nameless uniformity has been a powerful metaphor of oppression since Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, yet equally persuasive might be counter-examples, where the clock serves a galvanizing, communal role: for example, the hour of commemoration bringing people to the collective and respectful condition of grief, or marking the celebratory moment in which one year passes into the next. The clock has been an immensely important and varied organizational force which cannot be caricatured as singular, and all bad (Mumford, 1967). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the objective-subjective dichotomy itself legitimates a proliferation of time(s), 'objective' as well as subjective, all of which are upheld and maintained by the transcendental (and hence timeless) and assumed primacy of subjective time as the ground from which these distinctions spring forth. Here, what is

simultaneous and successive are given a priori; the fact of time is the presupposed condition by which different forms of time can be apprehended in experience. The result of this, we argue, is not only confusion. It is also, and foremost, the source of concealing time. As clock time comes to be asserted as against humans (Clark, 1990) and is aligned with the now surpassed Newtonian assumption of objective time as abstract and absolute, the human struggle with the rule of time becomes a question of political (and hence managed) struggle. Time as the reality under which human beings ultimately suffer becomes simply the (not yet realized) possibility of human self-realization should another version of time win out in the future. In short, if the rule of time is conflated with the clock – a human artefact – we are no longer in time, time *is in us*, meaning, perhaps, that Bourdin inadvertently found the right target after all: himself.

## Time-for-us II: The Practice-Oriented View

The discussion of different forms of time has been especially prevalent in studies of organization going by the moniker ‘practice-based’. This rich seam of research has been undertaken, in part, in response to confusions ensuing from the subjective-objective time dichotomy, and the studies often function as a corrective to it. Though varied in impulse, ‘practice-based’ studies are interested in time as an organizational force constituted in, and constituting of, human action or thought. Practice theory accepts the distinction between objective and subjective time but takes these as distinctions being settled upon in commonsense affairs: the politics of one position gaining agreed ascendancy over others and gaining acceptance as the pragmatic, habituated way of going about things. From such a perspective, ‘objective’ time is not really objective, but merely objectified subjective time; there is no objective time as such, only versions of time woven into and embodied in human practices, of which clock time is the most dominant. For time *as such* emerges from what Orlikowski and Yates (2002, p. 685) call ‘the medium and the outcome of people’s recurrent practices’. These studies are sustained by a view that time is both subjective (emerging from or shaped in action) and objective (embedded and shaping action), an ongoing union created in the bridging work of ‘temporal structuring’ that covers both the institution of time patterns and the intersubjective expression, embodiment and transformation of such. This conception of time is deployed to catch the co-construction of time within organization – indeed, to make it synonymous with organization – and to try get to the bottom of time dimensions inherent to organization practices.

Time becomes something being produced endlessly within the present understood as a situation or condition of human habit that is more, or less, settled. A sense of the past and future spool out of the present in response to these experiences of settlement. They are not fixed, but made available, either to assure and confirm what is already being practised (the symbolism of funereal or succession rituals, for example) or to act as repositories of knowledge to be called on to enhance or transform practices (enlisting an origin narrative to justify rebellion, for example). In the present, there is always the possibility of revising the future and the past, depending on the events being experienced to which both past and future times are being enlisted (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Time, it seems, is nothing outside of being temporally structured along the routine walkways of practice. The temporal structures can be explicit such as calendars and clocks, tea breaks, business cycles, timetables or reporting conventions, but also more diffusely implied in organizational rhythms such as: project team synchronization; conventions of career promotion based on experience and maturity; maternity breaks; perceptions of equipment obsolescence (including of humans); veneration of long-standing procedure; or forecasting such as strategic planning (Boden, 1997). With structures comes an organizing matter-of-factly through various forms of social coordination constituting our everyday (organizational) life: routines, schedules, diaries, appointments, punctuality, mutual commitments, plans and eulogies. This organizing is, of course, also clock-based, keeping life organized,

the parts synchronized so each translates into the other through constantly negotiated processes of allocation, scheduling of activity and synchronizing different rhythms (Hassard, 2017).

Braided into these organizational structures, norms and routines, practice-based studies notice forces of linear impetus or direction. These are multiple and nuanced, but at risk of denuding their undoubted subtlety we can frame them as either backward-looking (for example, the retrospection of sensemaking studies or studies of the rhetorical use of organizational history) (Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn Trank, 2010) or forward-looking (for example, studies of agility in which organizations become temporary forms exposed to inherently contingent, open future; Bakker, DePhillippi, Schwab, & Sydow, 2016), or strategy studies alive to the different temporal rhythms experienced at personal, organizational and industrial level (Nadkarni, Chen, & Chen, 2016). In backward-facing studies, time is structured as a source material, the ground, the origin, from which originating beginning an organization can re-root itself – placing where we have come from alongside where we are allows us to better configure what we are and will become (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Studies whose temporal impetus is forward-looking configure time as a provocation, one whose unpredictability carries opportunity and risks alike, inviting creativity. In both directions time also flows, hastily or slowly, inducing feelings of excitement or lack, and these can run multiply and either in sympathy or in tension with one another. Being a question of emphasis, however, neither side is experienced without the other, with studies showing that if researchers linger long enough with events, then periods, or linear progressions of ‘then’, ‘now’, ‘when’, might always be configured anew, and multiply (Crossan, Pina e Cunha, Vera, & Cunha, 2005; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015).

In these practice studies socially constituted time remains part of a technics of living, a force conducive to, or corrosive of, human practices, to its productivity and (self)development. The indicated struggles (of using history, say) are not with time as such, but with time as an aspect of organization that needs elaborate consideration if we are to better settle on agreed understandings of organizational reality and possibility. Humans organize time, time serves organization, and where it fails and breaks down, or where one form dominates, alternatives emerge, either to repair, resettle or replace what is broken, or in riposte.

Studies of time reflect this, developing a temporal sensitivity toward the way it expresses itself through practice, not simply as something measured and used as a scale, but more pervasively, considering, for example, how, when we act, we often do so as both reaction and anticipation, understanding our experience in its being continually recombined in the service of time-bound expectations, hopes, fears and interests. Woven into and emerging from human practice (a technics) time becomes *available* as an important, indeed foundational, piece of conceptual equipment. Not only does it organize through the provision of standard units by which to parse experience into linear sequential occurrences, it affords humans (practice-bound species that we are) a sense of timeliness or appropriateness (*kairos*). Because events are time-based, they can be *read* as requiring specific and differing forms of human involvement: they invite a human response, giving the impression that the world is of an ontological form that invites, and responds to, intervention, and that there are good and bad forms of such. The question of timeliness (taken up in studies of *phronesis*, for example) is a pragmatic and value-based question of good organization: for example, how might the encouragement of experiment and creativity be braided with the conditions of predictability, reliability and transparency (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013), or at which juncture does a narrative configuration of organizational memory allow strategists to design a compelling, future-oriented sense of strategic vision so that others feel they belong (Hatch & Schultz, 2017, Parker, 2002; Suddaby et al., 2010), or how best to organize employees suffering bereavement so they can grieve ‘properly’, or illness so they can ‘recover’ (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2016)?

While such practice studies thoughtfully enrich our nomenclature of time, they also constitute a deepening of the forgetting of time beyond organization. Unsurprisingly, for according to practice

theory there is no time beyond practice. We begin with practice, out of which immediate and often improvisational social interaction both the past and future present the present with facts, but facts experienced through events of selection or perspective taking. These events appear in organized patterns of habit, evaluation and procedure, which structure experience, but without determining it. Practices evolve and change because habituated intelligence functions as a future-conscious prefiguring of what to expect: people feel themselves in possession of given facts from the past (sedimented in commonsense narratives) while remaining alive to the inevitability that any immediate expression and experience of these past facts can, in repetition, also be different, but only in a limited way. The organizational skill, say, of senior strategists operating is to embrace continuity without relying on it uncritically (Berg-Johansen & De Cock, 2018). Here time becomes past and future rolled into an unfolding present which proceeds, to quote T. S. Eliot (1936) from *Burnt Norton*, '[I]n appetency, on its metallated ways.' Appetency meaning 'with appetite for': a pragmatic experience of making timely acts of selection. Time becomes subject to 'time work' in which the future and past are colonized by organizational technology and technique (Berg Johansen & De Cock, 2018; Flaherty, 2003).

If time inheres in work and social practice (Bakken, Holt, & Zundel, 2013; Ingold, 1995), we become aware of temporal structures being socially constituted, and hence of the emancipatory possibilities that inhere in both intelligence (prefiguration, allowing expectation and anticipation to influence present conduct) and improvisation (the immediate, affective force of gestural and conversational interaction) that characterize human practice (Mead, 1934; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). In organization studies these possibilities for change have been observed in multiple acts, ranging from the rearranging of tea breaks to a temporal reordering of the distinction between work and leisure. This sense of structuring time affords human practice the experience of transitional and transformational possibility: the structures only live in a state of expressive embodiment. Yet it is also a limited sense of time for there is nothing in our awareness or experience of time beyond our own collective endeavour and agreement, time beyond human practice is typically forgotten.

### **Time-for-us III: The Process-Oriented View**

In studies of human practice, then, time is configured through (potentially) managed events (acts of selection and perspective taking). Budgets, for example, are apprehended cyclically through calendar structures, but as having rhythms that may clash with shorter or longer cycles of performance review, or with the more varied time frames of institutional investors, or even with different calendrical norms. Throughout, time is treated as though it is divisible, understandable (not least in the breakdown of past, present and future) and hence available for organization. And what goes for budgets also goes for growth patterns in industries, learning cycles managed through school curricula, the incubation periods of contagious disease spreading through refugee camps, and so on.

Recent developments in practice theory, in part prompted by the process thinking of Bob Cooper, question this assumed availability. As Cooper (2014) notes, time ascriptions such as past, present and future (or more specific temporal markers such as 'period', 'annual', 'cycle', 'slack' or 'origin') are counterfeit representations of lived experience if it is assumed that they refer to time itself, rather than constituting the reality of temporal organization. In process thinking, time has an outside – an indivisible, miasmatic flow of occurrence that is experienced in organizational settings, but which cannot be confined by organizational form (Helin et al., 2014). Time structures (deadlines, holidays, opening hours, the points of time over which trading algorithms 'compete') constitute time being organized in processes of individuation whose substantive nature is wrapped up in habituated occurrence. Process theory reminds us that these structures should not be conflated with the reality of time itself; time lives outside as well as inside practice. To realize this we need only

think about what it is to be present, and so 'in' the present. For humans this present is riddled with what, as we have already alluded to, Mead called interaction: the myriad human gestures and utterances by which the world is encountered. The immediacy of interaction constitutes an 'undifferentiated now' out of which a stretching sense of future and past emerge, made available through collective reflection, memory and expectation (Mead, 1934, p. 351). The undifferentiated now is simply experience, and it is out of this that the present emerges, accompanied inevitably by a past and future. The present is constructed in what Guillaume (1984, p. 6) calls the operative time taken to think about occurrence, in which operations time borrows spatial forms of representation: the narrow point of the 'now', stretching out to touch a past or future, in a trimorphic spatialization. It is from this basic grammatical trinity that all temporal structures riff. These structures are real enough, but only in the same way that the Christian trinity is real. Both trinities are agreed upon as an organizing form that allows us to pragmatically and spiritually get ahead, to be under way, without providing any firm sense of where to. And as is the way with religious trinities, whose alignments and implied hierarchies have been the subject of argument, sometime so intense as to constitute the splintering of civilizations, the pressing but often concealed question for the trinity of temporal structure in organization studies is: how can something continually organized into existence realize a durable, continuous and unified state? Process thinking asks this question of human practice, revealing the organizational fragility of what is, in habit, presumed solid.

In this, process thinking apprehends reality more as an ever-moving, restless flux of becoming: things are not first in existence and then subject to time, rather time – apprehended in ever renewing occurrence of event in acts of selection – is the ground from which the institutional structures, objects and identities of practice are being continually organized. Dorothy Emmet (1987) notices how this immediate experience of flux (of time) is not 'an instant' (which is a construction) but a spread (what William James calls a 'specious present') in which background and context play a profound role (as when Gestalt theory, for example, shows how colour and the patterned conjunction of form influences perception). Practices emerge from this immediate spread of interactive experience: they are the human patterns (or habits) of engaging with, and thinking of, experience so as to better sustain forms of human life in relation to other forms in the wider environment. It is such a 'spread' that Mead (1934, pp. 273–80), for example, encapsulates in what he calls the temporal interchange of the 'I' (the active, the immediate and novel expressive engagement with the now) and the 'me' (the reflective, the sedimented awareness of habits and values held in practices). In the context of process theory, then, we might think of organization as the collective sedimentation of interacting patterns of immediate action (experiment, intuition, curiosity, reaction) and extended reflection (routines, standards, expectations). As such organization itself becomes a temporal phenomenon whose forms are the residue of continually adjusting configurations of immediate experience made possible by the admission of information cast as the future (expectation) and the past (memory), as, for example, in Driver's (2018) compelling study of how retirement discourse can encapsulate a struggle for articulating oneself in the present.

A processual awareness of our participation in time, and more broadly of how all things are nothing more than actualities whose distinction arises from a participation in and sequencing of other actualities, finds studies of organization alive to how, temporally speaking, organization is so often held in the contingent and often paradoxical condition of having multiple presents (Hernes, 2014, p. 81). Esposito's (2011) study of fashion systems, for example, wrestles with the paradoxical organizational effects of loosening temporal structures. She identifies a system that espouses creativity and is riven with neophilia. Yet it is also stuck fast with the seasonal cycles and the symbolic tradition by which fashion businesses become 'houses'. The new comes from the old, the novel from the orthodox, and in the knowledge that their birth is also a necessary ending as they make way, with predictable compliance, for the next branded expression of innovative genius. The appearance of



temporal changeability fosters an organizational stability which in turn animates the very neophilia to which it is an organized response. Time is made available here, but with little of the stabilizing clarity of a neatly ordered plan delineating past, present, future. Likewise, in Bakker et al.'s (2016) study of temporary organization, they find transitory and fleeting experiences eliciting stabilizing and even necessary commitments to 'flat' and 'project-based' organizational forms. These forms elide permanence and are so enmeshed in wider organizational structures that their development can follow anomalous, untimely directions (Holmer-Nadesan, 1997), yet they live on.

The process view is alluring in its openness to such multiple, sometimes diverging, structuring temporalities, but once exposed to such miasmatic flow there seems to be no way of shutting off the taps. Studies that accept temporal contingency and paradox seem to be teetering on the brink of accepting an analytic void. Rather than acknowledge and attempt to manage this precarious position, process thinking embraces it. Robert Chia, for example, in his *Essai on time* (2002), duration and simultaneity, invokes Henri Bergson to correct the ontological misunderstanding that organizations exist 'out there' as discrete objects possessing distinctive characteristics or 'variables' to be studied in whole or in part. From Bergson we learn of intensive time, a direct and intense awareness of continual unfolding that finds organization a radically temporal phenomenon. This process view endorses – and quite fervently so – the ontologically generous priority of change or 'becoming', because of its greater authenticity.

Yet while it absorbs and even celebrates the grounding nature of changeability and provides a provocative riposte to the substance metaphysics pervading many studies of organization, the process view's affirmative focus on change also constitutes a forgetting of time. With the emphasis on process, the struggle to manage time structures gives way to a more fateful letting time pass. Any happiness is the happiness of 'dwelling' (in an Aristotelian sense of wonder, of belonging to *aesthesis*, to the aesthetic sensibility that potentially emerges in every sense perception), where we do not go with time, but allow it to pass. It comes with Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) notion of *flowing* experiences, and with Ingold's (1995) immersive sense of unimpeded, rhythmic and timely task work, a condition echoed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (2005) analysis of knowledge and expertise, by Bakken and Wiik's (2018) investigation of ignorance and vagueness, and by Zundel and Mackay's (2014) study of organizational cunning or *metis*.

This sense of complicity with the intensities and curlicues of everyday living finds in organization successive attempts at naturalized, prosthetic projection. Here the 'thingly status' of things and events is constituted in their contextually configured emergence, and with little in the way of conscious, ordered direction. Time remains anthropological and historical, though now fluidly so: things are never unified entities that can be grasped 'as' something, but constituted in processes of recall/forgetting, deferral and projection, to which there is no end. For example, an employee becomes an endlessly enterprising, updating autonomous self, or commercial ventures are valued only in relation to projected, potential earnings coupled to their agility in moving costlessly from one asset base to another, free from the shackles of having a distinct identity.

Fluidity is our grounding organizational condition, and time becomes the endless event of provocation between mutable and open things, each exposed to the other not as something known and fixed but as something withdrawing enticingly into the possibility of what it is not, but could become (Cooper, 2014). If time used to be understood as one variable among other, namely the tacit medium to which the organization was set and running, then process thinking propels time and temporality to the fore as *the only* variable in organization studies. In fact, following the spirit of process views of time means realizing that organization as 'entities' are exceptional – nothing more than 'islands of fabricated coherence in a sea of chaos and change' (Chia, 2002, p. 866).

This triumph of change over matter has two important consequences. First, with it, time emerges as a 'universalized *a priori*'. What was once (in metaphysical terms) ephemeral due to the condition

of the reality that human beings and things share is no longer so – it is merely subject to change and infinite malleability. Second, rather than a threat, time becomes the condition of the possibility of human self-realization and transformation. Time, in other words, remains unconditionally affirmed, and while it undermines all attempts at creating stable organizational form, the forming is itself regarded affirmatively as that which invites and provokes us into becoming more than what we are, a condition memorably evoked by Nietzsche's (1999, §24) metaphor of children making shapes in the sand without rational design, delighting in making and destroying the piles, absorbing the tragedy that forms are being made to then fall away through their simple (but not easy to imitate) expression of play; it is in creating organizational forms (ever aware of their temporary fate) that life is affirmed. So in process thinking, the negative force, exerted by time over human life, has been forgotten, not in being organized through timely action, but in being overcome.

### **Beyond Time-for-us, or Time-without-us**

We want to consider what is being lost in these affirmative views of time larding both the practice (timeliness) and process (*amor fati*) views. We want to remind ourselves what it was to feel the force of time as something to be resisted (what the novelist John Cowper Powys (1933, pp. 224–5) called *contemptus fati*) and, thereby, to open up a horizon for the possibility of time persisting beyond organization.

To do this, we argue, is to move from the Augustinian concern with *what* time is, to an understanding of *how* time is, an understanding inextricably tied to affective experience of the facticity of time. How do we come to address such feelings as this in organization studies?

Let us return for a moment to the story of Martial Bourdin, the anarchist bomber. Early in 1906, the incident in Greenwich Park provided Joseph Conrad with the genesis of a short story, which would eventually be published as the novel *The Secret Agent* (1907). In his 1920 'author's note' to the novel, Conrad reveals that the story came to him in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in casual conversation about the futility of anarchism (Burgoyne, 2007, p. 149), an experience which Conrad suspects spreads well beyond the confines of hardcore political cabals. In confronting readers with Bourdin's gruesome gesture, Conrad confronts them with a consciousness of their own mortality, a cessation of being neatly embodied in the thoughts of one Chief Inspector Heat, the detective character Conrad enlists to attempt 'acts of selection' that explain the explosion:

The Chief Inspector, stooping guardedly over the table, fought down the unpleasant sensation in his throat. The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as swift as a flash of lightning. The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician, Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous! He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, streaming, for the last time. The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye. (Conrad, 1907, pp. 157–1)

Chief Inspector Heat's name, it has been suggested, itself reflects the early twentieth century's shuddering fascination with the second law of thermodynamics: that the heat and light of the Sun will eventually decay; that entropy in all systems tends towards a maximum; and that scientific knowledge is a knowledge only of statistical probabilities, not of absolute certainty (Whitworth, 1998). In

his encounter with what remains of the anarchist bomber, he comes face to face with the cosmic pessimism implied by this law on a more human scale: time as the horror of finitude. Here is a fear of death in which – for all their differences, ‘anarchistic or other’ – he and the bomber merge, sympathetically entwined in a stretched moment wrested from the processual flow of material experience without any affirmative power, and without the designations or purposes configured by practice. The spread is brief indeed, between winks of an eye, a glimpse of how death puts a stop to the pattern of human affairs. The moment is intense. Investigating a man’s death, Inspector Heat catches a glimpse of his own, how he and the bomber will fall into an indifferent and infinite space in which time is sovereign, without exception, a space lying along the edge-lands of human practice, a nebulous zone between the impersonal and the horrific. This is time beyond, even antagonistic to, human affairs – horrific exactly *because* of its indifference, and yet, because of that, the space against which human life might set itself, as Tranströmer attempts in his 10 minutes, twice a day.

Reading carefully, we also find a reflection of this time-not-for-us – or better perhaps *time-without-us* – in the work of Marx. In a self-corrective observation made in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx, 1976, p. 127), he writes:

we should not say that one man’s hour is worth another man’s hour, but rather that one man during one hour is worth as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of time.

For Marx, what is at stake, as Peter Osborne has pointed out (2010, p. 18), is not the opposition between and combination of different forms of time – positive and negative, one fully human and one of alienation, one lived and the other mechanical – but between time *as such* and human life. What is being commodified here – and Marx is careful to point this out – is not primarily time: it is not the *hours* that are made to count, but the life they ‘measure’. Labour-time, as Osborne argues, ‘is a part of the time of the labourer; that is part of the *life-time* of the labourer.’ (2010, p. 20). Put differently, Marx’ point is not just that the labourer has been abstracted of his own time and in labour is forced to live the time of another – of capital. Rather, and more cruelly, capital *exposes* the labourer to time in its most naked form: the impersonal time of which he is a mere incarnation, the time that was never his to take or give in the first place, because *it takes him*. Capital exposes the labourer to *time-without-us* and what it abstracts is his ability to offer up resistance. This is the reason that external labour, the form of labour in which human beings, according to Marx, alienate themselves, is ‘a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification’ where life dwindles and then gives out (Marx, 1986, p. 15). Rather than being a productive and creative source of events, time in this equation, for all its infinite potentiality, is finite in its actuality. For Marx, this measure of finitude, rather than the affirmative stance, is the ontological basis of the real ‘value’ of time.

An illustration of how this mortification comes to the fore in human organization is found in Donald Roy’s (1959) seminal article ‘Banana Time’ describing the time-based rituals constructed by a small group of machine operators to get through the working day. Roy’s study is a much-quoted example of the construction of time and of how production line monotony and fatigue are absorbed through the creation of inter-group norms woven from talking, fooling and fun, norms structured with time breaks for coke, cigarettes, peaches ... and bananas (Ancona et al., 2002; Butler, 1995; Hassard, 2002; Hernes et al., 2013). Though less commented on, it also offers compelling insight into what happens when such ‘time work’ fails, viz. when the ‘pointless’, affirmative play exhausts itself. Roy calls the event ‘Black Friday’, a ‘dark day [that] shattered the edifice of interaction’, reducing the work situation to ‘a state of social atomization and machine-tending drudgery’. The wretched struggle with time that ensues is initiated by a collapse in the ‘framework of times’ being sustained by the social interaction of the machine operators because two of the operators fall out with one another (at the unwitting instigation of Roy himself). Consequently, the workers are left in ‘a pall of silence’ as ‘a very long, very dreary afternoon dragged on’. Furthermore,

as Roy explains, with ‘the return of boredom, came a return of fatigue’ and ‘a succession of dismal workdays ... creeping again at snail’s pace’ (Roy, 1959, p. 165). Instead of socially constructed ‘times’, the machine operators are now confronted with time *in singularis* – described by Roy as a ‘formidable beast of monotony’ (p. 158) and a ‘beast of boredom’ (p. 164).

What confronts Roy and his work comrades here, we argue, is not just another configuration of temporal structuring; it cannot be meaningfully captured within the boundaries of the so-called ‘subjective-objective dichotomy’ (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), nor as a wash of undivided flux in which to create forms and watch them fall away. As time structures collapse, the sheer facticity of time is revealed; the fractioned and empty units of which have no socio-historical (human) content, but just reproduce themselves, dismal workday after dismal workday, as an obstacle to life. Rather than a result of ‘time work’ – something that is done *to time* in its social constitution – what emerges here is something that time (again, *in singularis*) does *to us*. In this affective dimension the reality of time is inextricably connected with the human experience of finitude, which according to Marx also marks the ultimate ontological basis of its value. In this naked form, beyond the confines of *time-for-us*, we encounter *time-without-us*. This is time as it refers to the movement of life itself on a cosmic scale, a facticity which Theunissen correlates with an ‘emptying out of time that makes it a time of dying, not of living’ (1991, p. 305). It reveals human life as it is set *and organized* against time, ‘the blind and mute fact of human existence’ (1991, p. 304), designating it, not as a social practice or process, but as an affective force to which each of Roy’s machine operators either capitulate, or which they have to face.

## Conclusion

So what insight might be won for organization studies in this apparently gloomy encounter with time? Perhaps the question can best be answered by returning for a final moment to the bombing in Greenwich Park. In a brief passage in the *The Secret Agent* Conrad provides a partial justification of the anarchist’s actions: ‘There could be nothing better. Such an outrage combines the greatest possible regard for humanity with the most alarming display of ferocious imbecility’ (Conrad, 1907, p. 60). Bourdin’s actions, Conrad seems to suggest, show a profound regard for human life and how it was being snuffed out by the construction of clock time. We sense so much even from the reports of the event. Reading them one is struck, gradually, by the detail of timings and how pervasive clock time already is at the end of the nineteenth century. The universal diffusion of clocks, pocket watches and bells of Victorian London constituted the spread of a ‘super-subjective temporal schema’ in which, suggests Georges Simmel (1989, p. 120), people were forced to ‘correspond to the calculative exactness of practical life which the money economy has brought about’. There is a direct line from the normative critique of this capitulation of human life to the clock, and to, for example, today’s critique of the world of 24/7 capitalism with its disenchanting eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities (Crary, 2013; Gregg, 2018). In attempting to blow up clock time, Bourdin was, in effect, attempting to blow up a form of subjectifying organization by which time was told with a one-way authority impervious to appeal, setting in train what Lewis Mumford (1967) later argued was the industrial revolution proper, for only with the clock was time made exogenous to social relations, in order to manage them (Hassard, 2002). In different ways, as we have argued, this normative critique is reflected in much organizational research.

Yet, just as importantly, the anarchist’s bombing in Conrad’s novel is viewed as naive. Its ‘ferocious imbecility’ lies not so much in its being entirely symbolic. Far more, it lies – and still lies – in the ritualized playful structuring to which the gesture reduces the human resistance to time. There is a heavy irony in this argument, of course: the intense and subtle thematization of time in organization theory has served not to deepen our comprehension of time, but, furtively, to render

innocuous its threat. And yet, it is precisely the forgetfulness of time's negativity in practice and process-based studies of time, we argue, which prevents such studies from pursuing their promise to embrace 'a broader conception of time and temporality [...] through the temporal experience of managers as they live in the flow of time' (Hernes et al., 2013, p. 2). Practice theories broaden their conceptions of time by weaving them with pragmatic and hence instrumental commitments to timeliness and, through these temporal interventions, building effective and just structures, thereby securing human lives against undifferentiated chaos. Process theories, while they are ever-sensitive to the fragility of habits and norms, tend to broaden conceptions of time by finding in temporal grounding romanticized views of a bountiful flux and flow in which it is the making itself (Nietzsche's image of children playfully forming sand) that enriches human life.

In both cases time is conceptualized as affirmative, either as a tool-for-use in human lives, or as an open space for play and hence creative possibility. This 'lyrical and therapeutic anthropomorphism of the Absolute', as Eugene Thacker (2014, p. 114) calls it, unthinkingly finds in the human an unchallenged ascendancy, with the objective (or at least presubjective) force of time being reduced to 'clock time' coupled to the 'possibility of enacting different temporal structures' (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p. 686) by way of organized riposte. There are some exceptions, for example Gregg's (2018) discussion of atmosphere and Mohammed's (2018) ethnographic sensitivity to sensible, unthinking time. Also there are emerging efforts in historical understandings of organization in which a sensitivity to how actions occur in sequences and contexts (they are placed rather than being caused by ahistorical determinants) and an awareness of multiple temporalities are being coupled to care for subjective experience (especially micro history) (Wadhvani & Bucheli, 2015, p. 11; Wadhvani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018). Yet by and large the felt experiences of time, and its micro-vocabulary, are passed over in favour of classified variants and unlocated theorization.

This ascendancy of organized time can be summarized as having four aspects, loosely based in the work of Theunissen (1991), and which serve to distil our argument in this essay. First, time in organization studies is subjectified. Time is no longer out there, it is a reality *in here*, a product of those who live it and their intersubjective co-dependences. Everything that people do in organizations involves time; yet time, apparently, is nothing in itself. We are no longer in time, time is in us. It belongs exclusively to us, to the human world(s) we organize, and which organize us. Second, as a direct result, time is pluralized. There was 'objective' time; and then the realization that objective time can only ever be objectified subjective time. This impasse releases a plethora of variant times and temporal binaries: clock time and task time (Thompson, 1967); even time and event time (Clark, 1990); fungible time and epochal time (Bluedorn, 2002). Third, and following the human-all-too-human character of these variant binaries, all time is universalized, it has no outside. There is no eternity, time is that in which being itself has its unending life. Nowhere is this as thoroughly illustrated as in process-oriented studies making time an all-encompassing horizon of the understanding of organization. Also in narrative studies, grounded as they typically are in emplotted structures of sequenced events, endings and beginnings, stable and distinct characters (Popp & Holt, 2013). Finally, fourth, and perhaps most important, as the negative force of time sinks into oblivion, time becomes wholly affirmative. Organization studies construes time exclusively as the benign condition of human possibility. Time, ultimately, is affirmed as the medium of change and transformation, which allows (potentially) for human productivity and self-realization.

We have argued that the real challenge for organization studies does not lie in finding a richer and varied cant for this affirmative ontology of opportunity and change. Indeed the search for conceptual breadth constitutes a further and deeper forgetting that time-in-itself has nothing for us, save our end. After all, exposing the grounds of time's destructive presence in the midst of organized life is the first step towards a comprehension of the world in which we live as both human and non-human – or simply as *more than us*.

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