

The Logics of Rationalized Temporality

How Time Impedes Organizational Agency in Social Responsibility Activities

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The logics of rationalized temporality: how time impedes organizational agency in social responsibility activities

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“Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent”

(Thompson, 1967)

We live in an age where time is our most treasured resource. In all endeavors of life, we seek to control and exploit time towards specific ends, be it in organizational strategies, education, family logistics, career planning. We have colonized time with the clock and related technologies, and time is now a global currency that translates directly into money. The modern organization has developed out of this rationalization of time, and much management theory and education centers on temporal notions of efficiency – if we cannot work *more*, then how can we work *harder* and *smarter*, so as to spend time most *productively*? As will be argued in this article, rationalized temporality is one of the most powerful social constructions with which actors guide their behavior in contemporary organizations, and it invades other social constructions without our notice. This has real effect of our ability to develop new social solutions that lie outside the rational standards, as the case of a corporate social responsibility program will illustrate later.

One lens with which societal, social constructions can be observed, is the Institutional Logics perspective, and I will use this to identify specific social constructions and their relation with rationalized time. Institutional logics have been characterized as “supraorganizational” social constructions (Friedland & Alford, 1991) that shape our perceptions of right and wrong behavior over time. They comprise “the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) . It is the argument of this article that institutional logics are not as omni-powerful as theorizations would suggest, but are themselves embedded in a social phenomenon that resides on an even more fundamental level of human experience: time. Logics, as they have so far been theorized, may “organize time and space”, by treating time as a functional variable of social structure and agency. However, much sociology of time positions time as inseparable from social structure, contending that human experience is inherently created by and in socialized temporality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hassard, 1990; Hassard, 1991; Joas, 1996; Mead, 1932) . From such a perspective, institutional logics would not organize time, but rather develop in close calibration with dominant temporal regimes. In contemporary organizational life, the dominant temporal regime is founded in above introduced modern industrial rationality; a temporality of our current world so pervasive that it has become taken-for-granted (Adam, 2004; Firth & Robinson, 2014) . This rationality, based on lengthy historical developments such as clock time, industrialization and Cartesian dualism of mind and matter (Adam, 2004; Joas, 1996; Joas, 1993; Simpson, 2009; Thrift, 1981), is a building block of the

modern organization. It is a rationality in which time – and agency with it – is commodified and controllable by the rational actor. Time thus becomes a precious resource with which we can plan and create our future, and each hour and minute counts. Though many different logics can be identified in organizational life, the agency of organizational actors must inscribe itself in this rationality to make sense to other actors and ongoing strategy-making. Thus, both the access to logics on the fringes or outside rationalized temporality and the potentiality of each logic in emergent everyday organizational life, are impeded by rationalistic temporal ontologies.

We do not normally recognize these impediments and the dominance of rationalistic time frames. One way of bringing them to light is to look at areas of contestation, where these temporal strategies cannot be readily applied, because the tasks at hand are ill-fitted for rationalist instrumentality and demand novel, creative agency in terms of unfamiliar strategy-making. Two theoretical endeavors into such areas of contestation are institutional theory and American pragmatism. Institutional theory has pointed to areas of contestation with concepts ranging from decoupling to the newer “institutional hybrids” perspective. In institutional hybrids, frictions between different institutional logics present opportunity to create novel, hybrid forms of structure and/or content. However, much of the empirical research appears already embedded in rationalistic industrial temporalities, where efficiency, outcomes and causality are proof of progress. The hybrid forms that arise from these frictions create *novelty* within the overarching temporal hegemony of rationalized agency. American pragmatism offers another theorization of contestation, in which challenges emerge in the present that do not match existing habitual behavior. This leads to a creative search by the reflexive “I” of past experience that can be recombined with anticipations of the future, creating new depositories of experience from which to create novel responses to the present (Baert, 1992; Mead, 1932; Rosenthal, 2000). Such creative agency is not “rational”, but continuously emerges from the situation, corporeality and sociality of actors (Joas, 1996). Studying creative agency as an a-rational construct helps us identify the reach of actors’ experiences and anticipations. This may allow us a more finegrained understanding of how and why they contest and succumb to hegemonic social structures, in this case the structure of rationalistic industrial temporality.

In the full version of this short paper, I will use the case of the development of a social responsibility program to investigate the appearance of rationalistic temporal ontologies in everyday organizational agency. I will analyze how the logic of “care”, based on a temporality of “abundance” (Firth & Robinson, 2014; Nietzsche, 1968; Nietzsche, 2014), is colonized by temporal-rationalist ontologies underpinning the dominant logic of “business”. The primary agentic “vessel” for this colonization, I argue, lies in the logic of “management”, in which actors draw on habitual past knowledge and limited future horizons because they a) have no time to

bring their reflective I into play, and b) are situated in an environment where foreseeable and rational means-ends relationships must be constantly imagined and proved through practices and symbolic actions.

The full paper version will proceed as follows: I first provide a theoretical framework for understanding rationalistic temporality, as well as the type of action theory that sustains this pervasive time construction. This is supplemented by a pragmatist theorization of action, which provides us with a way to follow action as an emergent and creative activity and identify its temporal orientations in the case. I then briefly describe the institutional logics perspective and define the points of observation of logics that I will use to identify institutional logics in my empirical case. Proceeding towards the case, I introduce my (ethnographic) methodology and draw the framework for the analysis. I present the case; the development of a corporate responsibility program in a health care company, and inductively discern the three institutional logics that I build my analysis around. The analysis unfolds across three sequences of the case, each showing the friction of the care logic and the business logic. Within and across these I explore how the managerial logic, in the agency of core managers, yields to rationalized temporality – finally resulting in the dismantling of the care logic to the benefit of the rational temporalities of the management and business logic.

The aim of the paper is threefold:

- To contribute to institutional logics theory by showing that temporality underpins the development of the social meta-structures that we call logics. To focus on contemporary Western world temporality, we are able to zoom out and see how the different logics that embed us are themselves embedded in a larger ontological hegemony of rationalist temporality. This understanding opens up for a critical appreciation of logics, in which we can explore the taken-for-granted scope of logics that we have typically theorized for organizations and investigate their larger historical embeddedness. One avenue for such research could be to study the existence and expressions of maverick, “rogue” (Land, Loren, & Metelmann, 2014; Quirke, 2013) or silenced logics that reject the dominance of “modern industrial time” (Adam 2004) and create alternative temporalities.
- To extend the attention to time in organization studies and institutional theory. Organizational and sociological scholars have repeatedly pointed to the curious lack of temporality as more than a functional variable in organizational theory (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013) . The interest in agency that many organizational disciplines are either based on (e.g. ANT, social movement theory) or have rediscovered (e.g. institutional theory, framing theory, strategy-as-practice) is strangely bereft of the temporal themes accompanying agency. Here I think not of the typical sequences into which we as scholars order action, neither of the causal connections of certain actions leading to certain results. Agency is in itself

temporal and in exchange with the temporalities of its environments (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Joas, 1996) . Human beings orient themselves to and through their pasts and futures, in order to maneuver the emerging situations of their presents. This is not a rational act in which time is disciplined by human beings, but is an ambiguous emergence of negotiations, iterations and projections in-the-world, connecting the individual with herself and her social world.

- To probe further into the connections of temporality and sustainability. An increased attention to and understanding of the future disruptions of climate change, poverty and ecological exploitation is emerging in across corporate, political and academic spheres. In the realm of organization studies, scholars are calling for more research on temporal agency for sustainable futures (Bansal & Desjardine, 2014; Lê, 2013; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012; Wright, Nyberg, De Cock, & Whiteman, 2013) and arguing that the short-term strategy horizons of contemporary corporations work against the temporal agency needed to create sustainable futures. However, this short-termedness is deeply institutionally embedded and organizations cannot easily transform to the long-term perspective or other alternative temporalities. Empirical studies of the temporal agency and taken-for-grantedness that takes place in corporate life may show us better the underlying patterns of short-termedness and thereby avoid proposing quick fixes or reifying rational temporalities in new forms.