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MULTI-TEMPORALITY AND THE GHOSTLY: CAPTURING THE SPIRIT OF TIME PAST AND YET TO COME?

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INTRODUCTION

The rediscovery of the importance of the past in organizational research has emerged alongside a growing interest in matters of time, history, and memory. Diverging from a tradition of analysis focused on the effects of chronological time and path-dependence histories, organization scholars have turned their attention to the social construction of the past and the temporal interplay between past, present, and future (Schultz & Hernes, 2020; Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010). They have explored how the past is remembered, forgotten, and used strategically in the present to build advantages for the future (Maclean, Harvey, Sillince & Golant, 2014). In doing so, researchers have emphasized the separation between different temporal orders (past, present, and future) and the mechanisms managers use to harness past and future for present purposes. They have been less interested in analysing how those orders intersect and overlap. That is, we still lack an understanding of the multi-temporal reality of organizations – how the past, present, and future are integral to the lived experience of organizing.

Much of the difficulty in studying multi-temporality concerns an inherited mind-set that classifies time in three dimensions. We perceive the world from a privileged point in the present and define the past and future chronologically as everything that came before and will come afterwards. This geographical metaphor is so strongly attached to the language we use to talk about time that scholars have difficulty in detaching themselves from spatial notions of past and future such as short and long (Kim, Bansal & Haugh, 2019), and near and far (Schultz & Hernes, 2020). But if separating time into past, present, and future is not always the best approach, how should we talk about it? The language of the ghostly (spirits, ghosts, spectres, and hauntings) offers a conceptually valuable way out of these difficulties.

We define organizational ghosts as absent members whose presence remains and is consequential to the actions of living members. Organizational ghosts exist in two related senses. First, they are a metaphor to a remembered other. Organizational ghosts can be understood in the sense that Gergen (2009) attributes to 'social ghosts', as a fictional (real or imaginary) other with whom we may engage in internal conversation. Second, alongside 'internal' conversations, ghosts manifest in conversations with 'external' others. In this second sense, ghosts exist to the extent that they are talked into being. In both cases, ghosts are a product of rhetorical language that uses ventriloquial tropes to make the dead speak (Basque & Langley, 2018). Imaginary, deceased, and absent others emerge in organizational conversations with performative force to guide the actions and decisions of organizational

members. Organizational ghosts are thus a specific form of rhetorical history (Suddaby et al., 2010) that re-presents and re-infuses absent characters with life.

We use the lexicon of the ghostly to propose an initial framework to study multi-temporality in organizations. Our framework comprises three core moments of organizational life: foundation, strategic change, and longevity commemoration. We argue that there are three major ways in which to study the past that persists in the present. Following Derrida (1994), who suggests phantoms assume different forms (Galois-Faurie, Barros & Grima, in press), we differentiate between manifestations of the ghostly. First, the taken-for-granted past is *the spirit* that animates an organization. This ethos is often built by founders and managers (Basque & Langley, 2018) and endures through the continuous beliefs of organizational members. The focus is on *keeping the past*. Second, *the ghost* roams the corridors of the organization. It keeps alive lessons from the past and provides advice on how to tackle current challenges. The focus is on *changing the present*. Third, *the spectre* haunts the present, warning of the consequences for the future of current actions; emphasizing the ambiguity of current actions *vis-à-vis* a sustainable future (Sasaki, Kotlar, Ravasi, & Vaara, 2020). Spectres have a recurrent presence in periodic activities of importance including the annual strategic planning round. The focus is on *steering the future*.

We illustrate our framework with examples drawn from our historical case study of household goods multinational Procter & Gamble (P&G) from 1930 to 2010. Our research question is: How can the lexicon of organizational ghosts illuminate the management of multi-temporality (the co-existence of past, present, and future) in long-lived multinationals?

TEMPORALITY AND THE SPECTRAL IN ORGANIZATIONS

Present-day organizations are increasingly pressurized into short-term decision-making. This focuses attention on the present moment and the short-term impacts of corporate strategy (Kim et al., 2019). Shipp and Jansen (2021) argue that objective time is privileged over subjective time, causing the significance of lived time to be misrecognized. Nevertheless, long-lived firms are aware of the benefits that drawing on their history can bring, recognizing it as a symbolic resource for the pursuit of competitive advantage. Suddaby et al. (2010) have advanced the construct of 'rhetorical history' as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and pliable resource to harness the power of a company's history in setting strategic agendas. This has generated a stream of research focusing on organizational history as amenable to manipulation by executives. Authors highlight the use of rhetorical history to support strategic decision-making (Sasaki et al., 2020), manage (dis)continuities (Golant, Sillince, Harvey and Maclean, 2015; Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2018), and strengthen organizational identity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Blending subjective and objective reality, organizational leaders can skilfully refashion the past to secure buy-in from stakeholders. This may entail the purposeful retuning of historical narratives for sensemaking purposes (Maclean et al., 2014), or organizational forgetting, whereby organizational rememberers are silenced to erase incidents or personae from the historical narrative.

Relatedly, scholars have investigated the uses of the past in organizing. Attention has turned to the enduring influence of company founders beyond their demise (Basque & Langley, 2018; Coman & Casey, 2021; Galois-Faurie et al., in press; Sasaki et al., 2020). The legacy of ancestry is prone to command enduring respect and can make organizational change more difficult. The past is thus not only something to be managed; it may also hinder as well as support managerial action in the present and future. However, in assuming that legacies are bequeathed from the past to the present, there has been little theorization as to

how precisely that works practically (Greve & Rao, 2014). Few studies address multi-temporality, how the past, present, and future inform one another in organizations.

Extant literature has embraced a chronological view of time that leaves unquestioned the conventional divide between past, present, and future. The relationship between past and present is represented through geographical metaphors of near and far from the location in which observers are placed (Schultz & Hernes, 2020). Even scholars who assume a more subjective (Shipp & Jansen, 2021) and event oriented (Hernes, 2014) approach to time return to this metaphor. We propose that exploiting the analytical potential of organizational ghosts as a theoretical construct, far from being fanciful, offers a promising approach to understanding the role of multi-temporality in organizational decision-making.

The ghostly disrupts the flow of time and causes different temporalities to co-exist and intersect. Ghosts have the capacity to conjure up what has been, while heralding what is yet to come. The ghostly thus implicates past and future in ways which we cannot necessarily foresee. Organizational ambidexterity can be temporal (Maclean, Harvey, Golant, & Sillince, 2021). The lexicon of ghosts affords a temporal ambidexterity that offers potential insights into the reconciliation of intertemporal tensions in organizing.

Interest in organizational ghosts is rising (Galois-Faurie et al., in press; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016; Pors, Olaison, & Otto, 2019). Much of it pertains to the shadow side of organizing. Organizational life is thick with ghosts. Former characters imprint themselves on places, depicted on the walls of corridors, or associated with named benches, offices, or shrines. The act of remembering is space-specific, whereby remembered spaces become associated with seemingly authentic pasts. Many ghost stories are founded on the notion of a ghost transmitting a transformative message to the living. For Gergen (2009), ghosts are revered remembered persons who encourage contemplation, act as guardians, and point to something that requires redress. The ghost is thus a social figure who appears when something needs to be done. The apparition occupies a space where history and the irrational converge, whose exploration 'can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life' (Gordon, 2008, p.8).

Integrating the literatures on temporality, rhetorical history, and the spectral offers potential for the study of temporal interaction in organizing. In re-presenting absent characters and discerning their agentic role, organizational ghosts emerge as a particular form of and resource for rhetorical history (Suddaby et al., 2010). This emphasizes the nature of organizational ghosts as a strategic organizational asset, not just as carriers of the historical narrative, but as playing a role in ensuring the organization's sustainability.

Our methodological stance is that of historical organization studies: organizational research that integrates theory development with historical analysis to enhance understanding of historical, current, and future-oriented social realities (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016, 2017; Maclean, Clegg, Harvey, and Suddaby, 2021). Fundamental to this approach is the gathering of primary data from documents and oral histories. We negotiated access to the P&G corporate archive with its archivist, two team members being granted access to the archive over several weeks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Time is attracting increasing attention amongst organizational researchers, alongside interest in the past, history, and memory (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). A related body of work has begun to explore how deceased executives are invoked in the present (Basque & Langley, 2018; Maclean et al., 2014; Sasaki et al., 2020). Despite this interest, time as a theoretical concept remains under-explored in organizational research (Shipp & Jansen, 2021), with little

known about the interplay between time and history in organizing (Schultz & Hernes, 2020). Much of the difficulty in studying multi-temporality is caused by our habit of categorizing time in three dimensions. The language of the ghostly offers a potential solution to these difficulties. As a product of rhetorical language that employs ventriloquial tropes to make the dead speak (Basque & Langley, 2018), ghosts represent a form of rhetorical history that re-infuses departed characters with life, highlighting their capacity for temporal interplay.

Our guiding research question is to ask how the lexicon of organizational ghosts may illuminate the management of multi-temporality (the co-existence of past, present, and future) in long-lived organizations. As an iconic company whose origins stretch back to 1837, P&G provides an ideal setting to investigate multi-temporality. It is a complex multinational where decisions must be taken in real time. As discursive presences performing the past in the present, the ghostly facilitates the integration of one timeframe with another, playing an active role in mediating between past, present, and future. It encourages an innate sensitivity towards temporality; patching over temporal divides dynamically and suturing the material and symbolic domains within which organizations operate.

We propose that there are three principal ways in which to study the persistence of the past in the present. The *spirit*, associated with keeping the past, discernible in practices of memorializing and re-membering, provides stability in the collective imaginary of the organization. The *ghost*, linked to changing the present, intuited in practices of ventriloquizing and re-orienting, counsels current leaders facing difficult challenges; becomeing a guide and mentor, a route to reflection and an inference to action. Finally, the *spectre*, instrumental in steering the future, evident in practices of commemorating and planning, highlights the ambiguity of current actions *vis-à-vis* a revered past. The evocation of a distant past is balanced with the projection of a sustainable future, rendered more urgent by the existential threat of climate change.

The temporal flexibility afforded by the lexicon of ghosts provides insights into how intertemporal tensions may be reconciled, with implications for strategic planning. The ghostly illuminates the process by which intertemporal transmission occurs in organizations, highlighting its capacity to flow in two temporal directions, retrospectively and prospectively. Strategic change becomes more manageable when organizational ghosts can be summoned to memorialize the past, re-orient the present, and project a viable future. In multinationals, organizational ghosts offer a means whereby members can get to know the organization in an immediate, personal way, navigating size and complexity across time and space.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we further develop emergent interests in ghosts in organizational settings (Galois-Faurie et al., in press, Pors, 2016; Pors et al., 2019) by extending explorations of the ghostly into the domain of long-lived multinationals. Whereas extant research has explored the ghostly in smaller organizational settings (Orr, 2014; Pors et al., 2019), where its impact might be assumed to be more pronounced, we show that it is consequential to the agency of others even in a multinational, despite its size, reach and complexity. Second, our work contributes to a recent stream of research that examines how deceased executives are invoked in the present (Basque & Langley, 2018; Maclean et al., 2014; Sasaki et al., 2020), with the twist of drawing on discussions of the uncanny in organizing (Galois-Faurie et al., in press; Pors, 2016). While the spectral is not (yet) a mainstream topic in organizational research, we show how organizational ghosts serve a vital purpose, comprising a 'shorthand' whereby members can learn about the organization's past, make sense of its present, and plan its future. Our third contribution is to propose that the language of the ghostly illuminates the multi-temporal reality of organizations by emphasizing the role of temporal interplay. We propose an initial framework that differentiates between manifestations of the ghostly (the spirit, ghost, and spectre) to encompass three moments of organizational life: foundation, strategic change, and longevity

commemoration. The *spirit* stabilizes the collective imaginary of the organization by preserving the past. The *ghost* provides advice to current executives when changing the present. The *spectre* highlights the ambiguity of current actions while steering the future. Keeping the language of the ghostly alive may actively aid the reconciliation of intertemporal tensions by enabling different temporalities to co-evolve, with implications for how history is managed as well as for agendas in the short and long term.

  Our research is limited by its reliance on one case study, and we might reasonably ask how representative this is. Organizational ghosts are specific to the organizations they haunt. As channels of emotion and moral action, however, they can move scholarly interest beyond the production of history in organizations, exemplified by rhetorical history, to the reception of history as lived. This turns the spotlight on the non-rational foundations of organizations. Studying the ghostly in organizations illuminates the space where the temporal and subjective collide, with the potential to re-spiritualize our theorizing of organizational life.

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