The Temporality of Power and the Power of Temporality: Imaginary Future Selves in Professional Service Firms

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Abstract

This paper extends existing understandings of power, resistance and subjectivity in professional service organizations by developing an analysis of how these relate to temporality. Drawing in particular on Hoy’s reading of the Foucauldian account of temporality, we conceive of disciplinary power regimes and resistance as inherently future-oriented (hence: ‘the temporality of power’) or, to use Ybema’s term, postalgic. Here, identity is something to be continuously worked on, in a perpetual process of ‘becoming’: becoming better or more successful within the terms prescribed by professional organization. In moving beyond the extant research focus on self-disciplined and/or counter-resistant professional selves, we draw attention to the imaginary future self as an employee response to disciplinary power. In contrast to the future orientation of disciplinary power, this response envisages the future as a discontinuous break (hence: ‘the power of temporality’) with the present which we examine as a form of resistant postalgia. Here, identity is something to be re-made with a fixed end point in prospect rather than an unending process of becoming. Building on in-depth qualitative data gathered at two professional service firms, we explain how imaginary future selves can shed new light on the interplay of power, resistance and identity.

Speaker Profile: Christopher Grey

Following a PhD at Manchester University I worked at Leeds and then at Cambridge University, where I became a full Professor in 2005 and was a Fellow of Wolfson College. In 2007 I moved to Warwick University where I was Head of the Industrial Relations and Organizational Behaviour Group until 2010 and between 2010 and 2012 I held a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship. I joined Royal Holloway, University of London in October 2012. I have also held several visiting appointments, most recently as Velux Foundation Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School in Denmark and currently as Professor-invité at Université Paris-Dauphine in France, and I am a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge. I am or have been a member of the Editorial Boards of the Journal of Management Studies, British Journal of Management, Critical Perspectives on International Business, Philosophy of Management, Management Learning, Journal of Management Inquiry, and Organization of which I am an Associate Editor.

I have a broad set of research interests within organization studies, with a focus on sociological and historical analysis. My work is broadly located in ‘critical management studies’, and I have made several contributions to defining this approach. My research has been published in journals such as Organization, Organization Studies, Human Relations, Accounting Organizations and Society, Sociology, and Academy of Management Learning and Education. Most recently I have researched the organization of codebreaking at Bletchley Park during World War Two, giving rise to the book Decoding Organization. Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. I am also the author of the best-selling student primer A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Studying Organizations, the third edition of which was published by Sage in 2013. This book has been translated into Chinese, Portuguese, Swedish and Russian.

My current research focusses especially on secrecy in organizations and, with Jana Costas (Free University Berlin), I am preparing a book on this topic to be published by Stanford University Press. However, the paper presented at this seminar (also written with Jana Costas) comes from another of my longstanding research themes, namely that of power, control and identity in professional service firms.