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Finitude and Decline in Organization and Management

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Opening Keynote Address

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH: CONTEXT FOR ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICE

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Outline of Talk

1. Introduction – Three mythical stories
2. Temporal approaches to finitude, death and decay
3. Knowing and making Futures
4. Finitude and future making in contexts of ICT

Introduction - Three Mythical Stories

In my opening address to this conference on ‘Finitude and Decline in Organization and Management’ I want to paint the larger socio-cultural picture and provide a historical back-drop against which the contemporary stories are being told. I begin with three mythological stories¹.

The Babylonian goddess Ishtar, queen of the sky, went in search of the spirit of her beloved Tammuz, god of vegetation and corn, who was cruelly murdered. On her journey to the realm of dead souls and land of no return, which was ruled by her sister Erishkigal, Ishtar faced many perils and torments. While Ishtar was imprisoned in the netherworld nothing could grow and flourish on earth. The desolation on earth became so great that the gods pleaded with Sîn, ‘lord of magic and master of the waters that nourish the world and contain all wisdom’, to intervene. A deal was struck that restored Ishtar to her former power and beauty and allowed Tammuz to return to the living. There was, however, one condition: Tammuz could only spend half the year in freedom, the other half had to be spent with Ishtar’s sister in the otherworld.

‘When Tammuz was with Ishtar on the earth, the goddess rejoiced and nature and humans flourished. But when he returned to Erishkigal below, Ishtar grieved and all signs of life died.

¹ Chapter 1 ‘Time Stories’ in Adam, B. 2004.

This is how it has been from the beginning of time and this is how it will be to the end’².

In Norse mythology the gods of Asgard retained their eternal youth by eating the golden apples supplied by Idun, keeper of the apples of immortality. When Loki betrayed Idun and delivered her to the giant Thjazi who imprisoned her in a fortress in the land beyond the rainbow, the gods lost their protection against the ravages of time. Faced with their rapid disintegration, Odin forced Loki to rescue Idun from captivity in the land of giants. On Idun’s safe return, ‘the gods reached into the basket and took of the apples, and they ate, and they ate and they ate...’³.

The story told by Homer in the *Odyssey* is of a quest not for immortality but for the safe return to mortal existence after extensive encounters with the death of friends and foe during the long war against Troy. On the perilous journey home, which lasted a full ten years, Odysseus encountered many dangers and temptations. He met lotus-eaters, a Cyclops, the master of winds, cannibals, an enchantress, the ghosts of the dead, sirens, sea monsters and a goddess. For Odysseus death was not only a danger but also a temptation. As he got drawn into the beauty and ease of life in the otherworld of witches, sirens and goddesses, so the life and wife that he sought to return to receded further and further into the distance, faded into the shadow, became less real. ‘To break the spell of death he must embrace finite existence’⁴. He had to choose life and love as a mortal over death and love as an immortal.

Why did I start with three stories from the mythological past? What relevance might these stories have for the conference theme of organisational finitude and decline? Clearly, all three stories relate to death and finitude in some way. All three depict cultural responses to the inevitable, the unknown and the untameable. The pertinence of these mythical tales, I want to argue, is manifold: the stories confront us with aspects of time and the temporality of being that have tended to slip out of sight with the industrial way of life. They address matters concerning the finality and contingency of being and non-being. They acknowledge that transience and finitude place limits on human being and that it takes effort to transcend those limitations.

Looking more closely at these stories we find that the Babylonian myth explains the seasonal cycle of life and death in nature. The Nordic myth suggests that immortality is not a given, that even the gods had to work hard to achieve and to maintain their immortality, while the Greek *Odyssey* tells us that when life is tough death may be the easy option. More importantly, the *Odyssey* points out that life is a choice that has to be actively made and that breaking the spell of death depends on the far more difficult decision of embracing finite existence.

The mythological stories operate simultaneously at three different temporal levels: the human level, which includes individuals and society, the cosmic level of stars, planets and the universe, and the spiritual level which encompasses the otherworld of deities and dead spirits, heaven and hell, paradise and nirvana. It is the human level which is most explicitly bound by the finitude of earthly time. The cosmic level is marked by

² This myth is recounted in Ferguson 2000: 112-115; see also Littleton ed. 2002: 96, 103.

³ The apple is a magical fruit in the myths of many cultures, among them Greek, Celtic, Gypsy. For the Myth of the Golden Apples of Idun, see Ferguson 2000: 72-75; also Littleton ed. (2002: 308).

⁴ See Dunne 1979/1973: 20.

cycles of eternal return and renewal, whilst the spiritual level is beyond time; it precedes and transcends earthly time. Meaningful life, the myths suggest, is one that is integrated into these three realms of being and that manages to connect the associated times of existence. In mythical stories the finitude of human life is therefore related to the never-ending cycles of the cosmos as well as the eternal realm of God(s) and the spirits of the dead.

Moreover, since death cannot be lived through and since it is therefore outside the realm of experience, people have chosen different solutions to the existential dilemma of not knowing what lies beyond. Across the ages they have found different ways to escape the 'curse of time' and the terror of non-existence after death. Yet, no matter how the afterlife has been conceived, it seems that meaningful existence is tied to the belief that life does not end with death. The mythological quest for eternal life, therefore, becomes first of all a quest for knowledge, that is, knowledge about death and about what lies beyond it. However, it seems that advances in this quest have been accompanied by an inescapable distancing from nature, by an ever-widening gap between body and spirit, earth and otherworld and by an increasing estrangement between human life in finite time and spirit existence in an a-temporal, eternal realm.

A second response to finitude is through action, that is, the cultural production of immortality and permanence. Through cultural activity people create a world that endures beyond their personal life spans, a world that renders mortal being immortal. Thus, the legends of classical heroes press the importance of fame as that which outlasts a person and makes their life worthy of being preserved in legends and folk tales. Equally, cultural productions from art, myth and writing to ritual and religion are all means to transcend individual being beyond its allotted earthly time. All are cultural responses to the inevitability of finitude.

Through its focus on death, finitude and decline the conference addresses an aspect of socio-cultural existence that is largely neglected in our understanding of social relations and organisational practices. Much of what I want to talk about, therefore, is known only at the tacit level. It is not something that is thought about explicitly, thus does not feature as an issue in organisational planning and decisions. And yet, as implicit assumptions it deeply informs practices. To help with the task of making the implicit explicit I first outline cultural practices against the contrasting back-cloth of nature's processes. Secondly I show the historical nature of current practices in order to create a strong awareness of difference across time and space. This in turn allows us to appreciate that if our approaches have been different at other times and places then they can be different again.

Temporal Relations to Death, Discontinuity and Decay

Finitude is a fact of all life and living. In nature there is no life without death. The two are mutually defining and constituting. We could even say death is the source of life or in Goethe's words, 'death is nature's device to create lots of life'⁵. Thus, at the level of nature and our body, death is the pre-condition to birth and to the eternal braid of life.

⁵ Quoted in Schneider 2005.

At that level, therefore, continuity is achieved through discontinuity, permanence through impermanence, growth and evolution through finitude and decay.

The certainty about finitude and knowledge about its importance, however, have lacked comfort at the socio-cultural and individual level. It has not been enough to know that we have to die and that we are able to create continuity through the birth of successors. It has been insufficient because nature's way of creating continuity provides neither answers about the meaning of life and death, nor what happens to us – our bodies and our souls – after death. Nor is it concerned to render some individual units immortal.

For human beings, however, these are important issues. Thus, we find that every known culture has come up with answers about existence after death. Every known culture has created cultural means of continuity and permanence. And every known culture has developed responses to decline. These cultural answers about existence after death relate to, for example, religious beliefs in a life after death in heaven or hell, in reincarnation, on the migration of souls, or in the re-absorption into the original world of 'everywhen'⁶ that we came from.

Cultural means of creating continuity, permanence and certainty, include, for example, individual and collective practices such as heroism, as a means to ensure that people will remember you and tell stories about your deeds and actions that keep you alive after your death. In a very different way, rituals are a collective way to create continuity, permanence and certainty. Here the original is repeated and performed in unchanging form across generations at infinitum. As such, rituals connect ordinary acts to the future in a predictable way that creates unchanging permanence and thereby provides individual and collective certainty and security⁷. A similar function is fulfilled by promise and contract. Promise connects the present to a predictable future. So, for example, if I am promised employment (as long as I also keep to my end of the bargain) then potential endings are regulated and I can plan my life and my future with confidence⁸. A further cultural response to finitude, impermanence and discontinuity at the individual level is to create social institutions that outlast individuals: individual students and lecturers come and go but the university, where they studied and worked, will go on long after they have gone. Individual employees come and go but the company continues. These institutions have absorbed individuals and their contributions into the wider institutional frameworks.

Nature's response to decline encompasses renewal and repair, on the one hand, and growth based on the ecological life cycle of give and take, on the other. Cultural responses also involve a number of options. These might entail the elimination of decline through the creation of enduring things and structures or they may also encompass renewal and repair but cultural renewal tends to be based not on ecological but entropic principles, which means the new input creates waste that is mostly not re-absorbed as life source for others. That is to say, industrial societies' pursuit of growth and progress is not ecologically cyclical but entropically linear, with the unusable energy growing with every move.

⁶ See Stanner, W. E. H. 1968.

⁷ See Eliade, M. 1989/1959; also Adam, B. 2004 chapters 1 and 4; and Adam, B. and Groves, C. 2007 chapter 3.

⁸ See Adam and Groves 2007 chapter 2.

With respect to death as the ultimate response to decline, we can say that death is not just a key characteristic of nature but also prevalent in cultural practice. A most graphic example would be the economist Schumpeter's idea of 'creative destruction'⁹. However, here too effects are very different if the creative destruction is rooted in an ecological give-and-take where the waste of one system or unit is life source for the other in the eternal chain of being, or based on a linear, entropic economy where that which comes to an end is discarded as waste for the scrap heap and where, consequently, the dumping ground grows proportional to this form of cultural renewal. In the contrast between ecological and entropic principles, the economic version of 'death for life' increases entropy, that is, unusable energy, with every move.

We further need to consider a cultural strategy where decline is eliminated. Here a paramount example would be the creation of clock time. In nature time is marked by change: that is, by ageing, decline and death as well as life and growth. With the cultural creation of clock time, such decline, finitude and growth have been eliminated as key features of time: the clock repeats time in unending circles of sameness without finitude, decline or difference. In fact, decline or difference would mean the clock is going wrong. As such, clock-time sets a cultural beat of unending sameness which is superimposed on the variable rhythms of nature and social life.

In what way then can the focus on time and especially the future enhance understanding of these interdependencies? And how might an explicit focus on the future help with understanding finitude and decline in organisational practice?

Knowing and Making Futures

My work on time and the future¹⁰ has shown that finitude is threatening on two different fronts: first, there is the fear of the unknown, that is, the ending of something customary that had become familiar and is accompanied by an unknown beyond. Here counteracting efforts were/are concentrated on making the unfamiliar familiar and the unknown known. Secondly, there is the terror of nothingness, the fear of the void after death. Here counteracting efforts were/are focused on postulating a life after death, to characterise this existence in the afterlife in all its guises, and then to delineate what was to be expected of this continuity after our earthly existence has come to an end. In most cases those two threats are intertwined in a complex way and our historically and culturally distinct responses to them have diverged widely with respect to the ways futures are known and made.

In the mythical past people had dominion over space and matter whilst the Gods owned and ruled over time. In the western cultural history this was the case right up to the Middle Ages: time belonged to the Gods and God. The future in particular was the realm of fate and providence. It was pre-destined and pre-determined for us by nature and otherworldly beings. This predestination applied most pertinently for finitude and death and had clear consequences for knowledge and for action. Knowledge about fate and the pre-destined future meant gaining access to something that was already pre-existing. To know it required tuning into the minds of gods and their intentions. This

⁹ See Nowotny, H. 1994/1989.

¹⁰ See Adam 2004; Adam and Groves 2007; and www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/

knowledge was the expert domain of prophets and oracles, seers and sages. Their prophecies and divinations pronounced on the inevitable, on something that was going to happen regardless of actions intended to change the foretold fates. (Both Greek and Nordic mythology are full of stories of this kind.) Knowledge of the pre-existing future, therefore, was primarily intended to help prepare for the inevitable. In this context attempts to intervene in fate proved pointless. That is to say, when death is pre-destined, the idea that one could control it is meaningless.

When, during the Middle Ages, ownership of the future gradually shifted from Gods to people¹¹, it changed everything: the nature of the future, the nature of our knowledge of the future and the action potential associated with the future at both an individual and collective level. All this had obvious implications for our relationship to death and the unknown future. When the future is no longer thought to be pre-determined but in our hands, then it is up to us to shape futures to our desire and to make futures to plans and blueprints. In this new context *we* can shape our personal and collective history into the long-term future. Making *history of the future* becomes not just a possibility but a reality. Equally, if our life span and therefore our death are not pre-determined we can do things to prolong life. That is to say, efforts of seeking to take control over our life span become meaningful.

However, the shift to human ownership of time was not as straightforward as it would seem. There was a price to pay for this change in ownership. To have dominion over time and the future and to be able to shape both to our desire meant that the future was no longer pre-determined but became *open* instead and with it non-knowledge and uncertainty began to reign supreme. Once the future was subject to human design¹² new forms of knowledge and control had to be developed to tame this *humanly created unknown*. The development of science belongs to this period of shifting ownership of time. So, for example, scientific knowledge of this culturally produced future was based on aggregate past facts that were projected into the future. In contrast to prophets and sages, scientists do not foretell individual occurrences in particular contexts but predict patterns of occurrences on the basis past experience and evidence of large numbers of collective facts. For example, they could predict collective death rates on the basis of past deaths¹³ but have no access to prediction about occurrences of individual deaths. Moreover, scientists are immensely skilled in producing long-term futures but in situations where scientific action produces novel effects, they cannot know their own products in their futurity, that is, with all their temporally extended outcomes. The same applies to economic innovation: the economy continuously produces novel outcomes with great skill and agility but in their futurity these inventions become ever-increasing unknowns. Thus, the new knowledge of open futures was based on knowledge of the past in a context where the creation of novel futures produced outcomes that were inaccessible to this knowledge based on aggregates of past facts.

This in turn had significant social consequences with direct bearing on the conference theme of death and finitude in organisational practice. With the pursuit of progress, innovation and limitless growth the predictable stability of tradition was cast aside. This meant that many of the cultural safety and security structures, which were set in place to handle potential finitude and insecure futures, were abandoned for the adventure and

¹¹ For informative texts on the matter see Le Goff 1980; Hohn 1984; and Max Weber's 1904-5.

¹² Arendt's *The Human Condition* is important here. See also Adam 2004 and Adam and Groves 2007.

¹³ For example, Durkheim's famous study of suicide.

thrill of accelerating change. With this move control of the future became ever more difficult¹⁴. Moreover, progress and innovation and accelerated growth entail that things come to end at an ever increasing rate. This applies to objects, social structures, institutions, relationships, and established interdependencies. Death at all these levels becomes common place. Finitude becomes rampant. As in Indian mythology, the serpent begins eats its own tail.

The conference text suggests that we have no structures in place to deal with that situation, no safety measures, no palliative structures, and no rituals that help us cope. Implicitly it invites us to work towards developing such organisational structures. However, inventing such measures is not easy, given that the implicit assumptions no longer hold on which our relationship to the future and to finitude is based. They are assumptions from a by-gone age that are no longer appropriate to the contemporary temporal condition of the pursuit of progress, the quest for innovation, the global networking of relations and the valorisation of speed. The production of rituals and structures appropriate to the contemporary condition requires change at the ontological and epistemological of theory and knowledge practice.

Finitude and Future Making in Contexts of Electronic Instantaneity and Simultaneity

The three interdependent pursuits of progress, innovation and speed mean that finitude becomes a base condition of our contemporary existence not just at the end of individual lives but of our daily lives. Endings become the norm, routinely embedded in everyday existence. Moreover, not only are they happening ever more but they also occur in ever shorter succession. If we now add electronic information and communication technologies into the equation we find that all these conditions are intensified to a point where beginnings and endings are no longer necessarily separate but may happen virtually at the same time. This means that they often lack the gap (between beginning and end) that was so important for understanding, knowledge, reflection, decision making and knowledgeable action. If we lack this gap then our causal way of understanding and relating to the world becomes inappropriate for those contexts. Even the relation between action input and imagined outcome no longer holds. Our entire product thinking is undermined.

To understand those speeded up interdependencies requires not a spatio-material perspective but a temporal one. It demands that we come to terms with processes and that we encompass dynamic interdependencies. Moreover, since dynamic interdependencies are irreducibly social, the individualism that so powerfully underpinned our socio-economic system is inappropriate for action strategies in which process, accelerating change and interdependencies predominate. This brings us almost full circle, close to the mythological context where we started – but only close, because there is no going back, no undoing past developments. Change is always irreversible and unidirectional. Thus, in its closeness to previous conditions, today's context is both similar and different. Just like in earlier times, endings and finitude are constituted outside our control and thus are once more experienced as inevitable. What

¹⁴ For my writings on time control see Adam 1998; Adam 2004 chapter 6; and Adam and Groves 2007 chapters 5, 6 and 9.

differentiates past and present conditions is a) the speed and intensity with which endings follow one another and b) that not gods but *we* have brought about those endings over which we appear to have no control.

Let me finish with just a few thoughts that arise from this and thereby open up issues for discussion and debate.

- First our theories and implicit assumptions need to become adequate to their contemporary context. Amongst many other things this involves the development of a process perspective on our daily lives, our socio-economic activities and our ongoing future making. Matter, space and time need to form an integrated unity in our understanding and analyses of contemporary organisational practice.
- Secondly, we need to appreciate that only a long-term perspective allows us to see the larger picture, thus understand our actions in the wider temporal context of making open futures in conditions of interdependency and high-speed change. This need, however, is easier identified than satisfied given the troubling mismatch between the capacity for long-term action and the inability to extend responsible governance to time-spans appropriate to the reach of those actions. When acceleration is factored into the equation the misalignment becomes even worse: the faster our actions produce change the more our temporal perspective is narrowed. The difference is easily experienced by comparing driving a car at high speed with walking: the former restricts our spatio-temporal vision to the here and now while the latter allows us to extend both gaze and concern to the distant horizon. The point, however, is not to replace one with the other but to find ways of creatively combining fast with slow pace, close with long-distance vision and focus on the now with a long-term perspective.
- Thirdly, we need to accommodate in our theories and actions the inescapably social nature of the outcomes of individualised organisational practices. This means coming to terms with the challenging new context for corporate responsibility and good governance which demands that we take responsibility for outcomes of actions that are ongoing, unbounded and uncontrollably rippling outwards towards an open-ended future, often beyond the personal life-span.

The titles of the contributions to this conference suggest that these are some of the exigent issues you will be addressing in your presentations.

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