Gender, Work and Organization in the Time/Space Economy of ‘Just-in-Time’ Labour

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ABSTRACT. Formidable changes are occurring in the organization of work, production and the labour process. The emerging world of flexibility, part-time contracts and ‘just-in-time labour’ has invoked systemic disruptions in the sequential ordering of time/space. Feminists have been less than sanguine in their resistance to the placeless, timeless logic of ‘just-in-time labour’. The flexible fragmented present of post-fordist production is variously argued to be in contradiction to the embodied social relations through which women ‘weave’ their own autobiographies. While sympathetic to the concept of ‘feminine time’, its application to the present labour market context requires intense inquisition and critical reflection. The modern episteme consisted of a constellation of discourses linked to narrative realism. This is to appreciate that basic to all forms of gendered subjectivity is a conscious subject living in time and capable of uniting the literal with the virtual, or linking one temporal order (the present) with others (the past and future). The ‘timeless times’ and dislocated ‘spatial flows’ of our current era threaten the ability of gendered subjects to form their identities into sustained narratives. Focusing on post-fordist flexible specialization, this article challenges the fixed, unitary, relational subject of feminist critique and begins to deconstruct the problematics of gender and work in the time/space economy of ‘just-in-time’ labour.

KEY WORDS. • gender • narrative • post-fordism • subjectivity • time/space
Introduction

The postmodern condition suggests that we are experiencing an intense phase of time/space compression and fragmentation both globally and locally (Harvey, 1991). Unparalleled advances in communication technology have intensified, fragmented and dramatically delineated complex value-chains, inducing a ‘systemic perturbation in the sequential’ ordering of time/space whereby ‘spilt-second capital transactions . . . systematically mix tenses in their occurrence’ (Castells, 1996: 464), and advances in information technology enable the ‘software universe’ of modern capitalist production to traverse space, literally and in ‘no time’ (Bauman, 2000: 117). Networks pervade the new social morphology disaggregating capital, labour and global institutions into diverse tempo-spatial contexts (Castells, 1996). Flows of capital, information and technology produce ‘timeless time’ as ‘things are happening instantaneously and linearity is broken in the discontinuity of hyperlinks, menus etc.’ (Van Dijk, 1999: 373).

The demise of linear time entails a loss of history as ‘the narrative temporality of our immediate experience has disappeared’ (Lash and Urry, 1987: 298). We no longer live our lives through identities imbued with sustained narrative meaning. Rather, ‘liberalisation and flexibilization have led to the radical disengagement of free agents from the system and to the unlocking of individual choices from collective projects and action’ (Gane, 2001: 269). Modernity is not merely characterized by a narrative temporality but this temporality is also axiomatic to the reflexive construction of modern subjectivity (Giddens, 1991). For ‘self-identity is not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual. It is a self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biography’ (p. 53). A crucial effect, then, of modern narrativity is the ‘handing down of possibilities from the self to the self’ which has the effect of ‘stretching’ our ‘being across time’. This is to say that ‘the movement of self-stretching across time is the source of a person’s self-identity, in that the person one is now has a historical connection with the person whom one was yesterday’ (Thomas, 1996: 45). But the excessive ephemerality, fragmentation and time/space compression of postmodern time/space radically disrupt the signifying continuities which characterize narrative time. This disjuncture is highlighted in the writings of Bauman (1997), when he identifies the postmodern self as characterized by the avoidance of fixed identity: ‘The hub of postmodern life strategy is not making identity stand – but the avoidance of being fixed’ (p. 89).

There is clearly intensity and tension (Cooper and Law, 1995) around postmodern temporal/spatial relations that were perhaps not so evident within representational regimes where the boundaries between one time and another or different spaces were clearer cut. Manifestations of these tensions abound. This article focuses on feminist responses to the intensified, fragmented times of
post-fordist flexible specialization (Wigfield, 2001; McDowell, 1991, 1997; Massey, 1994). Focusing on ‘just-in-time’ labour, the article challenges the fixed, unitary, relational subject of feminist critique. There is no essential self existing outside culture and language. The experience of women in the transient time/spaces of post-fordism’s fragmented reality cannot be taken as an unproblematic starting-point for feminist theory, because that experience has no overriding, permanent meaning. Conversely, deconstruction, as defined by Derrida, is a strategy which subverts the classical oppositions of the metaphysics of presence and in so doing, unsettles the phallocentric binary that it creates. This article deconstructs the temporal logic(s) of post-fordist flexible specialization to reveal an intriguing reconfiguration of gender, time and narrativity at work.

This article is structured around two main sections. Section 1 engages theoretically with key feminist discourses that have sought to provide accounts of gender inequality in post-fordist labour processes. Section 2 draws upon the seminal work of Richard Sennett (1998) to suggest that ‘just-in-time labour’ precipitates systemic disruptions in narrative constructions of social time. Several other writers have also drawn attention to the corrosive effects of ‘just-in-time labour’. Adam describes the flexibilization of working times as having a decontextualizing impact on people’s lives. As she expresses it, ‘the decoupling of work time from the time of the organization and from the collective rhythms of public and familial activities erodes communal activities in both the public and the private realm’ (Adam, 1995: 103). Castells (1997: 354–5) describes how the ‘dissolution of shared identities’ has become problematic for a modern era in which subjects are ‘unable to adapt to networking of firms and individualization of work’. Castells identifies resilient feminist challenges to the ‘radical individualism’, disembodied spatial flows and timeless times of intensified flexible labour. He variously describes how ‘feminist sexual identity movements, affirm control of their most immediate spaces, their bodies, over their disembodiment in the space of flows’ (1997: 356).

This article highlights the feminist contributions of Wajcman and Martin (2002), Wigfield (2001), Franks (1999), McDowell (1991, 1997), Coates (1997) and Massey (1994) as emblematic of more general critical feminist engagements with gender inequality and post-fordist labour processes. Although seemingly admirable in their endeavours, these resistant feminist discourses are identified as tending towards dualistic accounts of time/space and gender differentiation. Post-fordist labour processes are constituted through fundamental antimonies between male and female experiences. Conversely, deconstruction reveals both feminine and masculine identities to be problematized by the fragmented temporalities of ‘just-in-time’ labour. Empirical evidence of this complexity is evident in work-preference surveys which variously reveal that ‘the long hours culture is criticised by women and men alike for interfering with home life’ (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2001: 4).
This article draws attention to the crucial role played by narrative in the construction and interpretation of gender identity. A focus on narrative reflexivity suggests a way beyond the antinomies of male versus female experiences of post-fordist labour processes. Conceptualizing the narrative dimensions of gender identity expresses the sedimentation of time in discursive practices and the intersections of different forms of time in the constitution of gendered subjectivity. It is clear that self-identity, during the modern era, presumes a unique form of narrativity (Giddens, 1991). Time is axiomatic to the narrative of self, whereby self-realization involves ‘holding a dialogue with time’ (p. 77). Our lives are always a process of linking the past with the future by giving a sense of continuity to an ever-changing narrative of self. As Heidegger (1997: 158) expresses it, ‘we are [what] we were, and we will be what we receive and appropriate from what we were’. The plurivocality of discourse resolves the potential antinomies between ‘sameness’ and ‘selfhood’ (Ricoeur, 1990). Narrative mediations weave self-identities in the context of time, but they do so in the context of discursive struggles to define modern selfhood. Indeed, while ‘imaginative variations’ (Ricoeur, 1990) in narrative mediations render the self open to reconfiguration, the historical durability of discourse affects the context and the creative nature of intersubjective meaning (McNay, 1999). One can anticipate the argument in terms of gendered subjectivity. The intermittent, discursive nature of gendered self-consciousness requires interpretation and it is in the act of interpretation that narrative acquires its centrality (p. 325). Discursive identities are interpretative in nature. Meaning is not inherent to the discursive constructs of gendered identity, but is the product of interpretative strategies such as narrative (McNay, 1999: 325). Returning to the central contribution of this article – the article intends to draw attention to a demise of narrative time as having displaced linear time’s centrality to the productive economy, and in so doing significantly unsettles both masculine and feminine narrative times and their relations to the ‘instantaneous times’ of post-fordist labour processes.

1. Reflections on the Implications of Post-Fordism for Gender Relations at Work

Linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society, in a movement of extraordinary historical significance. But we are not just witnessing a relativisation of time . . . The transformation is more profound; it is the mixing of tenses to create a forever universe, not self-expanding but self-maintaining, not cyclical but random, not recursive but inclusive; timeless time, using technology to escape the context of its existence, and to appropriate selectively any value each context could offer to the ever-present. (Castells, 1996: 433)

‘For the first time in history, the capitalist mode of production shapes social
relationships over the entire planet’, proclaims Castells (1996: 471). But this variant of capitalism is insidiously distinct from its historical predecessors. Unlike ‘organized capitalism’ with its synchronous flows of capital and labour circulating on a national scale, contemporary capitalism is defined as ‘disorganized’ (Lash and Urry, 1994). Fragmented, flexible production, and irresistible networks of financial flows now circulate on an international scale. The writings of Castells show how capital accumulation proceeds and profit is generated ‘increasingly in the global financial markets enacted by information networks in the timeless space of financial flows’ (1996: 472). Castells (1998: 336) identifies a revolution in information technology and a dramatic restructuring of world capitalism to have brought into being ‘a new social structure, the network society; a new economy, the informational global economy; and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality’. The changes he documents have converged in a historical redefinition of linear time/space and its centrality to capitalist modes of production. Unparalleled advances in information technology have maximized ‘knowledge-based productivity’, making possible the globalization of the economy. Axiomatic to the revolution of informationalism is the fragmentation of power which ‘is no longer concentrated in institutions (the state), organizations (capitalist firms), or symbolic controllers’ (Castells, 1997: 359). Rather, power is diffused into global networks of capital, information, real and virtual images ‘which circulate and transmute in a system of variable geometry and dematerialised geography’ (p. 359). Liberated from the linear rationalist boundaries of ‘organized capitalism’, flows of capital, information, images and symbols dissolve linear time by ‘disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous, thus instilling society in eternal ephemerality’ (Castells, 1996: 467).

As networks progressively constitute the new social morphology of our societies, distances between networks contract, enabling operations at the speed of light. Castells (1996: 464) describes the ‘space of flows’ as inducing ‘systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena’ which may assume the form of ‘instantaneity’ or else ‘random discontinuity in the sequence’. Industrialization brought linear synchronicity to the assembly lines of Fordist factories. It heralded clock-time as the principle that was organizing principles of modernist production. But this linear, predictable time is being radically challenged in the ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996: 433). While time continues to be a valuable resource, its centrality to the linear chronology of mass production has been displaced by a contextual relativity ‘to the temporality of other firms, networks, processes or products’ (Castells, 1996: 439). In the ‘network society’ capital operates globally as a unit ‘in real time’ (p. 470), as its subjects and objects circulate at the speed of light. Lash and Urry (1994: 2–3) identify the accelerated circulation of objects ‘as the stuff of “consumer capitalism”’ in which a depletion of meaning precipitated by rapid turnover rates ensues a ‘homogenization,
abstraction, anomie and the destruction of the subject’ (p. 3). Thus the trans-formed productive economy has specific consequences for work, identity and the labour process.

**Just-in-Time labour**

Discontinuous reinvention of institutions. Business manuals and magazines today tend to portray flexible behaviour as requiring the desire for change; but in fact it is change of a particular sort, with particular consequences for our sense of time. (Sennett, 1998: 47)

Harvey (1991) defines post-fordism as involving a transition from Fordism to ‘flexible accumulation’, which accelerated the rise of flexible labour markets and flexible geographies of production. Piore and Sabel (1984) identify a ‘dis-massification’ of consumer markets that precipitated a breakdown of Fordist production. Rapidly fragmenting consumer markets are further coupled with advances in flexible technologies (e.g. computer-aided manufacturing) to have enabled low-cost, semi-customized commodities. Piore and Sabel (1984) identify these transformations in production as evidence of a new post-fordist technological paradigm defined as ‘flexible specialization’. Flexible technologies and economies of scale enable firms to ‘respond to the growth of flexible markets’ (Amin, 1995a: 15). Organizational flexibility is axiomatic to the new technological paradigm and is manifest in the prevalence of ‘decentralised management’ techniques (Amin, 1995b: 2). Elsewhere, Lash and Urry identify the displacement of Fordist productive systems by flexible specialized systems as invoking unprecedented transformations in workplace time/space. In keeping with their general concept of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’, Lash and Urry (1994: 56) describe a ‘shift from early modernist objective time and space to a late or post-modern subjectivization of workplace time and space’. Contracting production cycles necessitate a continuing ‘restructuration of workplace spatial layouts’ and the subjective inscription of meaning to the polymorphous times and places of work (p. 56).

The notion of a historical disjuncture in modernist economies of time and space is also evident in Bauman’s (2000) most recent writings. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000: 145) describes early modernity as characterized by a mutual dependence of capital and labour, which serves to fix their pursuits in bounded spatial locations. The routinized linear time of Fordist production is described as having immobilized labour, while expansive economies of scale and permanently fixed labour ‘bonded the capital’ (p. 116). Bauman argues that with the advent of ‘software capitalism and light modernity’, capital became unshackled from its previous immobility (p. 116). Similarly, Castells describes how, as global capital has become less reliant on specific labour, ‘capital and labour increasingly tend to exist in different spaces and times; the space of
flows and the space of places, instant time of computerized networks versus clock time of everyday life’ (Castells, 1996: 475). Capital is now ‘free-floating’, distinguished by the ‘disengagement and loosening of ties linking capital and labour’ (Bauman, 2000: 149). Axiomatic to capital’s disengagement from labour is the increasingly reflexive organization of production. Lash and Urry (1994: 56) identify flexible postmodern workspace(s) as instantiated ‘in the transformation of the firm in vertically disintegrated production systems’, whereby the fixing of supplier networks through the ‘objective space of the hierarchical firms’ comes to be displaced by the reflexively determined use of flexible outsourcing. The flexibly organized space of post-fordist inter-firm networks invokes changes in the temporality of production systems. While vertically integrated, geographically dispersed production operated according to objective linear time, contemporary outsourcing ‘makes possible the just-in-time delivery of intermediate goods and materials’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 56). But flexibility relates to more than just the untethering of post-fordist production systems. When applied to the labour process, flexibility induces unparalleled disruptions to linear narrative(s) of work-time.

The application of flexibility to the organization of work translates into two significant forms of operation: functional flexibility and numerical flexibility. Functional flexibility relates to the use of ‘labour across functional boundaries’ (Reilly, 2001: 28). Numerical flexibility refers to the variety of ways ‘organizations vary the numerical input to their work to meet the changing demand for labour’ (p. 30). The concept of ‘just-in-time’ labour relates specifically to numerical flexibility. It describes the use of fixed-term contracts, casual seasonal labour, agency labour, freelancers and outsourcing to respond to fluctuating demands for goods and services. Certainly its distinguishing features are not new; flexibility, ‘flexitime’ and flexible hours have extended historical trajectories (Castells, 1996). But what is new is the reapplication of flexibility to redefine the worker (Bauman, 2000; Franks, 1999; Sennett, 1998). Numerical flexibility suggests a form of time/space compression which no longer seeks profitability through ‘extracting more time from labor or more labor from time under the clock imperative’ (Castells, 1996: 437). Castells is drawing our attention here to just-in-time labour as provoking quite disturbing transformations in the organization of the labour process. Although a class-based analysis of these trends is a worthy topic, in this article it is the stimulant for examining feminist responses to gender differentials in the organization of just-in-time labour.

Wigfield (2001) details the prevalence of women in employment sectors and occupations characterized by numerical flexibility. Wigfield also identifies seemingly impenetrable divisions of labour within and beyond households as precipitating pervasive forms of gender segregation at work in post-fordist production systems (Stanworth, 2000; Bradley, 1998; Dex and Joshi, 1999; McDowell, 1991, 1997). Women’s dual participation in paid employment and
unpaid domestic work means that women often struggle to work full-time and opt for part-time, temporary jobs or homeworking to accommodate the domestic constraints on their time. Elsewhere, feminists have described tensions between the ascribed domestic responsibilities of women and the demands of numerical and functional flexibility. Franks (1999) describes how just-in-time labour involves the reconstitution of self to that of a ‘freelancer’, whose movement between short-term contracts is engineered by a markedly adaptable array of portfolio skills. Similarly Castells describes how the inventory management procedure for lean production is increasingly dependent on skilled labour ‘freed’ to make decisions in ‘real time’. Moreover, skilled labour is increasingly ‘required to manage its own time in a flexible manner, sometimes adding more work time, at other times adjusting to flexible schedules, in some instances reducing working hours and thus pay’ Castells (1996: 437). Similarly, Sennett (1998: 48) draws our attention to how short-term flexible change seeks to decisively and irrevocably reinvent institutions so that immediate futures detach the present from the past. Feminist writers describe how this decoupling of immediate futures from the collective rhythms of organizational time, public and familial activities is fundamentally in conflict with the domestic and economic constraints that shape female patterns of employment (Wajcman and Martin, 2002; Wigfield, 2001; Franks, 1999; Walby, 1997; Coates, 1997; McDowell, 1991). While sympathetic to these feminist discourses, closer analysis reveals their various contributions to be united by a systemic male versus female dualistic opposition. For example, the dual-systems framework adopted by Wigfield (2001) describes how patriarchy in conjunction with capitalism constrains women’s experiences of post-fordist labour processes.

Elsewhere, Castells quotes Irigaray (1984/1993: 7) to illustrate how feminists have sought to gain control of ‘their most immediate spaces, their bodies, over the disembodiment in the space of flows’ (Castells, 1997: 358). He describes how, motivated by patriarchalism, the space of flows facilitates a disembodiment of the female form through ‘reconstructed images of the woman, and fetishes of sexuality’, which ‘dissolve their humanity and deny their identity’. Irigaray (1984/1993: 7) promotes ‘a change in our perceptions and conceptions of space-time’ as we enter the new age. She advances an entreaty for ‘the inhabiting of places, and of containers, or envelopes of identity’ to subvert women’s place in men’s history. Franks (1999: 68) also vehemently challenges an acceleration towards labour conditions in which time is increasingly sacrificed for money and working longer hours is equated with personal status. In these situations, ‘men have tended to be more inclined to sacrifice time for additional money . . . women have been more inclined to seek a trade-off to give them more time’ for family responsibilities. Franks (1999) further describes the difficulties encountered by women as they attempt to reconcile the highly variant working patterns and hours of flexible work with the ‘relational’ temporal
rhythms of childcare. As she expresses it: ‘it is self-evident that if small children are involved there is a requirement for stability and regular routines, yet the freelance life means there can be periods of intense work and then no work’ (p. 90). Franks identifies the intensity of ‘just-in-time’ work schedules as particularly problematic for freelance female employees, who, having joined up ‘to the male working culture, are obliged to rank money before time’ (p. 69).

Wajcman and Martin (2002) draw attention to the negation of gender difference in the ‘reflexive modernisation’ thesis (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and Sennett’s ‘corrosion of character’ thesis. Criticism is levied at the centrality ascribed to personal goals in the reflexive shaping of family and career aspirations. Giddens’ ‘project of self’ is described as negating the gendered constraints ‘of identities with a strong “traditional” moral content’ (Wajcman and Martin, 2002: 999). Narrative analysis of 136 managers revealed that whilst male and female managers converge in the use of ‘market’ metaphors to construct a coherent narrative of self, a ‘deep sense of conflict’ distinguished female experiences of juggling familial responsibilities (Wajcman and Martin, 2002: 994). One gains here a sense of the significance of gendered relations to the temporal logic of numerical flexibility. An equally thought-provoking account of gender, numerical flexibility and identity is provided in recent feminist discussions of the post-fordist career construct.

Höpfl and Atkinson (2000: 140) provide a brief, but insightful reflection with regard to the gendered impact of numerical flexibility on the career construct. When referring to organizational relations in modernist time(s), they describe a ‘period in which women sought to define themselves as quasi-men’. An episteme, which they predict ‘is coming to an end [as] the desire for phallic-power (Kristeva, 1980) is being seen for what it is and the costs found to be too great’. The erosion of the narrative career is heralded by Höpfl and Atkinson as presenting revolutionary possibilities for women. For ‘these changes expose some of the ambivalences which women have experienced in their careers through the duality of commitment to home and work’ (p. 140). These ambivalences relate to incongruities between the ascribed domestic responsibilities of women and the demands of full-time career development. In the writings of Höpfl and Atkinson, female experiences of these incongruities provide a constant threat to the necessary fictions that sustain the modernist career construct. The logic of rational evaluation, so central to the career construct, is identified as concealing the inherent ‘untidiness’ of life plans, as ‘decisions do not always conform to a rational pattern’ (2000: 138). Female experiences threaten to expose the irresolvable antinomies of rational action by thrusting into the organizational arena the ‘conflicts of authority which confront women who work’ (p. 139). As women articulate the incompatibility of a work-time which delineates public from private ‘issues of choice, personal responsibilities and personal meaning are thrown into focus’ (p. 139).
The increasing pervasiveness of numerical flexibility and just-in-time labour, argue Höpfl and Atkinson (2000: 137), represents a radical disjuncture from the rationalist logic of the modernist organizational career. The fragmented times of just-in-time labour draw ‘more on notions of ambivalence and discontinuity than on clear and sequential series of career advances’ (p. 141), and in so doing represent a powerful alternative discursive regime, ‘one that poses a threat to the notion of a unitary trajectory of career development’ and reveals the paradoxes at root of this masculine orthodoxy. For instance, the forms of contractual agreements associated with the enforcement of numerical flexibility are described by Höpfl and Atkinson (p. 140) as producing dramatic disruptions in the reciprocal relations between employer and employee. Consequently employees are beginning to re-evaluate the rationalist career structure and the forms of organizational commitment that it presupposes. Curiously, Höpfl and Atkinson describe how, while these changes herald a crisis in masculinity, women are less threatened by the ambivalences and insecurities precipitated by the organizational restructuring required to implement numerical flexibility. Indeed, women have historically struggled to sustain organizational commitment and thus employment insecurity ‘has been a familiar context of women’s working experience for a long time’ (p. 140). What is significant here is the inference that numerical flexibility has precipitated a disruption in gendered relations in linear rationalist work models; and more specifically, that the ambivalences and insecurities that threaten to implode the construct of the modernist career are apparently less threatening to women. For this ‘male/female’ opposition (or even ‘feminine/masculine’ dualisms which assume each element to have a concrete existence in the world) partake of a tradition which constitutes the feminine as ‘Other’ to the masculine order (Game, 1991; Hekman, 1990). The theme here revolves around a notion more explicitly expressed by Derrida (1979: 65): the woman who pursues absolute truth, he asserts, is merely mimicking the errors of logocentrism, ‘and in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher this woman lays claim – just as much claim as he – to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility’ (quoted in Hekman, 1990: 168). Elsewhere, Derrida (1978: 320) echoes this sentiment with the assertion that all ‘metaphysical desire’ is masculine, even when manifest in feminist discourse (Hekman, 1990). Inverting the phallocentric binaries of the logocentric tradition and valorizing the feminine merely continues the hierarchies that constitute the feminine as ‘Other’ to the masculine order (Hekman, 1990). Indeed, whenever sexual difference is defined as the opposition between masculine and feminine, Derrida (1982: 72) claims, the masculine will always prevail. In this sense, feminist discourses, which valorize essentialist distinctions as mediating gendered relations to post-fordist labour processes unintentionally, reproduce these gendered inequalities (e.g. Höpfl and Atkinson, 2000). An alternative perspective involves deconstructing the mascu-
line/feminine opposition to the instantaneous times/spaces of post-fordist just-in-time labour. The following section introduces a theoretical account of gender and time, which suggests that gendered relations to post-fordist numerical flexibility are uniquely linked to systemic disruptions in the prevalence of modernist narrative time(s) at work.

2. Post-Fordism: Systemic Disruptions in Narrative Time/Space

In *Being and Time* Heidegger’s account of *Dasein* informs our comprehension of human identity as stretched across time (Thomas, 1996: 51). *Being* is dispersed through the chronicles of time. The existential time of *Dasein* possesses an intense immediacy, uniquely relevant to the person. And yet *Dasein* as a concept also draws attention to the way subjectivity is always lived in embodied form (Thomas, 1996). Subjects live time/space events as well as being constituted by them. Time is, therefore, inextricably bound up with places, spaces and the body. For people ‘do not so much think real time but actually live it sensuously, qualitatively’ (Urry, 1995: 6). The identity, which emerges in the process of the self, stretches across time as ‘the person one is now has a historical connection with the person whom one was yesterday’ (Thomas, 1996: 45). By reflecting upon previous experience, present contingencies and future desires, the self is consistently bringing itself into existence (p. 52). Narrativity is thus axiomatic to modern self-identity. Indeed, Giddens (1991: 76) describes how the production of an interpretative self-history is central to self-identity in modern social life. The ‘reflective monitoring’ of self ‘forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future’ (p. 75). Giddens describes the future as resonant with possibilities, ‘yet not left open to the full play of contingency’ (1991: 77). Foucault (1979), in particular, demonstrates the profound historicity of modern subjectivity. Society and culture provide specific ‘technologies of the self’ through which identities are constituted. The self is a developing site of cultural inscription (Thomas, 1996: 47). Our existential experiences of time are re-inscriptive of society’s social rhythms rather than mere representations. The modern self as a narrative text is always lived in an embodied form so that ‘subjects are dialogical, bringing specific personas, discourses and voices to contexts of negotiation and domination’ (Thrift, 1991: 461 quoted in Thomas, 1996: 47). But what becomes of narrative time when, as is currently evident, epistemic struggles transform cultural texts into polysemic spaces ‘where the paths of several possible meanings intersect’ (Barthes, 1987: 37)? More specifically, how is narrative time reconfigured amid the just-in-time discontinuities of post-fordist production?

Concepts such as ‘instantaneous time’, ‘timeless time’ and the ‘space of flows’ alert us to tempo-spatial disruptions, incoherencies and inconsistencies
involved in post-fordism’s break with narrative time/space. Lash and Urry (1987: 299) describe how in disorganized capitalism the narrative propensity of time is ‘less rational and has come to resemble a succession of disconnected events’. Consequently in post-organized capitalism ‘our temporality is in part then a “calculating hedonism” in which these “mini-rationalities” are packed into a larger and overarching irrationality’ (p. 299). The theme of dislocated presentism is evidenced in Jameson’s (1984) discourse, whereby postmodernity as the cultural logic of late capitalism replaces biographical narratives with disembodied spectacles, flattening the unconscious into a pervasively schizophrenic reality (Lash and Urry, 1987: 298). Jameson’s despair resides with the interminable consequences of instantaneous time. For the demise of narrativity results in the suppression of history, resulting in ‘our identities and especially political and collective identities [being] rendered incoherent’ (Lash and Urry, 1987: 298). The loss of narrative realism and the self as a coherently reflexive project embedded in time/space events resonates through Castells’s ‘network society’. Castells (1997: 355) describes the ‘networkers’ (as opposed to the networked), as individualized subjects governed by patterns of ‘rational expectations’, self-centred strategic calculations and driven by an insatiable Dionysian nomadic existence. The following section attempts to draw attention to the gendered impact of the erosion of narrative realism in post-fordist time(s). Deconstruction is applied here to reveal how post-fordist production unsettles key narratives of modernist work and the gendered relations that are their condition and outcome.

Engendering the Demise of the Narrative Career and Work Ethic

The potential loss of a long-term future threatens career, hitherto invested with a future orientation, with an identity crisis, and this in turn will restrict individuals’ construction of their future. Thus the future of career will both contribute to and result from the revolutions taking place in the construction and experience of time and space. (Collin, 2000: 93)

Goffman (1959: 123) defines the ‘career’ as allowing ‘one to move back and forth between the self and its significant society’. Elsewhere Heidegger has drawn our attention to the movement of self-stretching across time as axiomatic to the construction of self-identity. Clear affinities exist here between Goffman’s account of the career and being across time. An indication of which is provided by Collin (2000: 91) whereby the career establishes ‘a time-line and a trajectory, around which personal narratives, with their past, present and future could be woven’. In this sense, the self is a story constituted through sets of events in the present linked with memories of the past and motivated by future anticipation. To the extent that the western construct of the career is perversively orientated to the future ‘individuals have been able to construct their future, and
project their sense of self around the future positions and roles... from various
domains and especially those from the work organisation’ (p. 91). However, the
centrality of a delineable future time to the modernist construction of the career
invokes significant gendered differences.

Acknowledging that there are multiple and diverse forms of masculinity, it
is suggested here, as elsewhere (Seidler, 1989; Brittan, 1989; Kerfoot and
Knights, 1995, 1996) that modernist masculine identities are discursively bound
up with high levels of purposive-rational instrumentality in relation to a world
that there is an urge to control. Only the never-ending supply of new conquests,
challenges and uncertainties keep those caught up in such masculine discourses
forever trapped in a permanent striving to be in control (Kerfoot and Knights,
1996: 12). In this sense masculinity is transient, forever having to be renewed
by an unending series of new conquests and the (often unpredictable) approval
of others. Significantly, Bauman identifies the Protestant work ethic as driven
by compulsive individualism. As he expresses it:

The instrumental rationality favoured and privileged by the pilgrim’s life prompts
the search for such means as may perform the uncanny feat of keeping the end
of the efforts forever in sight while never reaching proximity, of bringing the
end ever closer while preventing the distance from being brought to zero. The
pilgrim’s life is a travel-towards-fulfilment, but ‘fulfilment’ in that life is tanta-
mount to the loss of meaning. (Bauman, 2000: 157)

One gains here an image of a ceaseless desire for control, but also one of an
inane futility: as Seidler (1989: 192) expresses it, masculine preoccupations
with control translates as a ‘desperate striving without ever really experiencing
the joy of fulfilment’. Similarly, Bauman (2000: 157) goes on to describe how
‘travelling towards the fulfilment gives the pilgrim’s life its meaning, but the
meaning it gives is blighted with a suicidal impulse; that meaning cannot
survive the completion of its destiny’. Parallels between the Protestant work
ethic and instrumental rationality are no coincidence, as both have historical
trajectories in rational linear time (Adam, 1995). Linear time by definition
involves a kind of transcendence that trivializes the specificity of the finite
moment. It requires a kind of estrangement from the present that entails de-
materialization, abstraction and disembodiment (Erm Barth, 1992). Every present
in linear time is in this way also the future. As Erm Barth (1992: 31) expresses it:
‘the rationalization of consciousness that supports the continuity of past and
future, cause and project necessarily supports kinds of thinking that seek to
transcend the present, concrete, arbitrarily and absolutely limited moment’.

Linear time’s continual transcendence from the present resonates with mascu-
linity’s compulsive hyperactivity. As with masculinity, the discursive constructs
of linear time’s future orientation encourage ceaseless instrumental planning and
compulsive ‘possessive individualism’ (Macpherson, 1962). Masculinity’s goal-
orientated instrumental planning encourages the pursuit of abstract instrumental objectives that both reflect and reinforce a disembodied and estranged relationship to the world. This involves acting in such a way as to maximize one’s returns with a view to the future. But the future always becomes the present at its point of realization. Consequently, masculinity strives to maximize its returns indefinitely; that is to say, into a future that will never be realized. Masculinity’s propensity for instrumental rational behaviour thus involves means–ends forms of behaviour where each end is always a means towards a future end of exactly the same kind. But this narrative reveals itself to be brittle and tenuous as it contends with the decentering timeless time of just-in-time labour.

Bauman (2000: 135) describes how, with the advent of ‘liquid modernity’, the modern romance with progress loses its allure as it becomes ‘individualized . . . deregulated and privatized’. It is now, Bauman argues, ‘individual men and women on their own who are expected to use, individually, their own wits, resources and industry to lift themselves to a more satisfactory condition’ (p. 135). While the Protestant ethic was not renowned for its collectivist endeavour, the ‘future present’ of just-in-time radically disrupts the narrative linearity of the modernist work ethic. For example, Sennett (1998) describes how modern forms of teamwork are in many ways diametrically opposed to the Protestant work ethic. As he expresses it:

An ethic of the group as opposed to the individual, teamwork emphasizes mutual responsiveness rather than personal validation. The time of teams is flexible and orientated to specific short-term tasks, rather than the reckoning of decades marked by withholding and waiting. Teamwork, though, takes us into that domain of demeaning superficiality, which besets the modern workplace. Indeed, teamwork exits the realm of tragedy to enact human relations as a farce. (Sennett, 1998: 106)

Sennett proceeds to provide a fascinating and highly engaging account of contemporary teamwork and the unparalleled challenges it presents to the linear work ethic of modern times. Central to this challenge is a seemingly irascible presentism, which steadily erodes narrative meaning and value. Sennett, with his trademark autobiographical, nostalgic style, convincingly describes how presentism undermines foundational fictions associated with the Protestant work ethic. Narratives such as ‘effectivity as achieved through accumulated experiences’, ‘work identity as constructed through embodied organizational relations’ and ‘commitment to organizational cultural as a road to fulfilment’ struggle to gain credence in a just-in-time context. But what is significant here is how the turnstile dynamics of teamwork reconfigures narrative time as it becomes ‘sliced into episodes dealt with one at a time’ (Bauman, 2000: 137). The long-term horizons of the work ethic are giving way to the immediate rewards of episodic teamwork as ‘each episode must be revealed and consumed
in full before it is finished and a next episode starts’ (Bauman, 2000: 137). Although this challenge to the Protestant ethic is no real tragedy, it leaves a trail of decentered deconstruction in its wake. Masculinity’s control ethic struggles to achieve definition in the absence of instrumentally reasoned long-term projects. In such activities instrumentally masculine ways of being gain privilege through displays of stoic resolution, deferred gratification, durability and accumulative rewards. In just-in-time labour processes, the Protestant work ethic is under attack as it becomes increasingly uncertain ‘whether the labour and effort invested today will count as assets as long as it takes to reach reward’ Bauman (2000: 162). But the emphasis thus far on masculinity should not be interpreted as inferring antimonies between masculine and feminine relations to the irascible presentism of numerical flexibility.

For many women (and some men) the culmination of the feminine discursive ideal finds expression in the subordination of self to the ‘needs’, demands and desires of significant others, be they family members, friends, superordinates, etc. (Davies, 1990, 1994). Femininity, then, is an ideal that in emphasizing acquiescence leaves little space for an active and autonomous subject who can place equal demands upon those whose labour and identity is serviced by contemporary heterosexual arrangements. As Lorraine (1990: 185) puts it:

... to connectedness, to the fusion experienced by fitting so closely to the desire of an other that she (sic) feels that other’s desire as her (sic) own, thus desiring what the other desires ... She (sic) cares very little about the pattern of social positions laid out by the Symbolic ... She (sic) cares very little about the ‘rational’ code for translating and transposing a particular self-identity through the position of the Symbolic. She (sic) attends instead to the concrete specificity of the particular individuals in front of her (sic) taking whatever shape they give her (sic). It is fine with her(sic) if this is within the socially acceptable parameters of the Symbolic. If not, she (sic) is perfectly content to subvert those parameters.
(Lorraine, 1990: 185)

In this sense, the feminine ideal is expressive of a ‘relational’ mode of engaging with the world (Davies, 1990, 1994). It is for this reason that the phrase ‘no time to call our own’ has an immediate resonance for many women. For unlike the projects prevalent within masculine discursive configurations that have finite time-scales in which measures of achievement can be imposed, ‘feminine’ work is unending and almost infinite in its ceaseless circularity. Those whose identities are discursively constituted as feminine invariably derive meaning, purpose and direction from their embeddedness in embodied social relations (Odih, 1999). But while the masculine self’s compulsive hyperactivity is motivated by the desire to control self and ‘other’ the feminine self’s actions are motivated by a desire for emotional validation. However, the discursive constructs of feminine identity, as with masculine ways of being, are variously constituted through narrative configurations of social time(s). The inherent narrativity of feminine identities is
evident when we reflect on the discourses of self-sacrifice and sensual embodiment, which serve to constitute the ideal femininity (Rich, 1977). Discourses of ideal femininity suggest meaning and direction to be obtainable through sensitivity to the situationally contingent needs and desires of significant others. Embodied social relations of this genre are predicated on continuous self-less engagement. But this form of embodied social existence struggles to be realized in the turnstile dynamic of just-in-time labour. Sennett’s (1998) seminal work provides a means to illustrate these incongruities between feminine relational time and the fragmented times of post-fordist numerical flexibility.

Sennett (1998) describes contemporary organizational culture as dominated by the imperative of ‘risks’. But the contemporary culture of risk is peculiar ‘in that failure to move is taken as a sign of failure, stability seemingly almost a living death. Destination therefore matters less than the act of departure’ (1998: 87). But the aftermath of continuous risk-taking is a feeling of anomie, of ‘meaningless success or the impossibility of reward for effort’, a condition in which ‘the person in these toils becomes prisoner of the present, fixated on its dilemmas’ (p. 91). The emphasis here on discontinuity unsettles the narrative self of feminine identity. Those whose identities are discursively constituted as feminine invariably derive meaningful existence, purpose and direction in terms of an embeddness in embodied social relations developed in and through time. While positioned in relation to power and space, feminine identities emerge from a self-interpretation constituted through embodied social relations. The feminine self is a developing site of sensual engagement and embodiment. Conversely, the self of post-fordist numerical flexibility is ‘a pliant self, a collage of fragments unceasing in its becoming, ever open to new experience’ (p. 133). The erosion of organizational narratives precipitates the corrosion of narrative identity, as ‘there can be . . . no coherent life narrative no clarifying moment of change illuminating the whole’ (p. 133). The notion of the self as ‘a collage of fragments’ clearly challenges the modernist discursive constructs of feminine identities. But this disjuncture is also of relevance to masculine narrative time(s), whereby the masculine desire for identity through mastery is premised on a continuous effort to control the future (Knights and Odih, 1997; Odih 1999). The rationalization of the career into a teleological linear project is seductive in its promise of control. But, as past experiences increasingly provide little guide to the present, the ‘Casino’ (Bauman, 2000) culture of contemporary organization suggests a crisis for both feminine and masculine narrative identities.

Conclusion

Sociologists have long recognized the centrality of time to the labour process, identity and subjectivity at work. Indeed, axiomatic to Max Weber’s Protestant
ethic is a ‘worldly asceticism’ which rejects immediate reward and imbues the
subject with a relentless ethical and individual responsibility for ensuring their
long-term security (Sennett, 1998: 105). E.P. Thompson (1967) argues that the
rise of industrial capitalism witnessed a transformation in the dominant ‘task-
orientated’ temporal consciousness, towards a greater synchronization of labour
and more exact time-routines. These changes entailed the imposition (e.g.
through official timepieces) and eventual internalization of a specific ‘time
orientation’ to labour and life. Thompson is of course referring here to the self-
imposed rationalization of work-time into homogenous blocks of linear time
(Adam, 1995). Critics of the hegemony of linear time have been vociferous in
their desire to reveal linear time as inextricably bound up with relations of
challenges to linear time’s centrality to the productive economy have been
no less dynamic in their critique (Davies, 1990, 1994; Hakim, 1991; Leccardi,
1996; Fagan, 2001). Significant distinctions exist with regard to the foci of these
feminist critiques. Within the area of work-time preferences, feminists have
sought to highlight and address gender differentiation in employment schedul-
ing (Fagan, 2001; Hakim, 1996; Boulin and Hoffman, 1999; Rubery et al.,
1998). Here it is generally argued that ‘the deregulated nature of the labour
market combined with the “breadwinner” ideology embedded in welfare state
policies channel women with children into part-time work and men into very
long full-time hours’ (Fagan, 2001: 241). A similar (although significantly
distinct) assertion is made by those feminists who focus on the production of
gendered time and subjectivity at work. These writers variously identify the
incompatibility of ‘women’s time’ with a linear perspective which separates
work from leisure, the public from the private, and task- from clock-based
orientations to time (Davies, 1990, 1994; Leccardi, 1996; Forman, 1989;
O’Brien, 1989). Elsewhere I have argued that many of these feminist challenges
are epistemologically grounded in the very same representational tradition that
has secured the hegemony of linear time (Odih, 1999). For these feminist dis-
courses tend towards a strategy of either reversing the phallocentricity of linear
time, or of synthesizing the binary elements of their discourse (i.e. its
male/female opposition) into mutually inclusive dualistic pairs. The problem
that unites these respective strategies is that they fail to replace the dualistic
epistemology that is at the heart of Enlightenment thought (Odih, 1999).

The emergence of post-fordist just-in-time labour in the current era com-
pounds the epistemological complexities of gendered time. For the current ‘flex-
ible regime’ begets ‘a character structure constantly “in recovery”’ (Sennett,
1998: 135). Conversely, feminine and masculine identities indicate the existence
of a conscious subject living in time and capable of uniting the literal with the
virtual or linking one temporal order (the present) with others (the past and
future). This article has been concerned to draw attention to the complexities of
narrative time as both medium and context for the production of gender identity in the time/space economy of just-in-time labour. Thus, instrumental rationality as a discursive construct of masculine identity and managerialist organizational discourses were argued to be radically challenged by fragmented times of just-in-time labour. As Bauman (2000: 128) says, ‘rational choice in the era of instantaneity means to pursue gratification while avoiding the consequences and particularly the responsibilities which such consequences imply’. Embodied social relations are no less suited to the extended present of just-in-time production. Evidence of these complexities is provided in recent surveys which suggest that both men and women would prefer more ‘work/life balance’ (DTI, 2003). Similarly, Fagan’s (2001: 260) study of work-time preferences has identified similarities between the sexes, stating that ‘for both men and women the most popular labour market developments would be more flexible hours, followed by earlier starts and finishes, while nightwork is definitely unpopular’. One might suggest that, given the findings of these respective studies, a concept of gendered time is simply no longer relevant to the current era. But this would once again involve oversimplifying a complex phenomenon. For example, Fagan (2001: 260) further identifies how ‘the reasons why schedules were inconvenient did, however vary strongly with gender’, whereby ‘women, particularly part-timers, frequently mentioned childcare problems and the need to fit household chores into their day’. The tensions and contradictions emerging here reinforce the necessity of conceptualizing temporality in terms of multiplicity. In the writings of Bergson (1950/1889), time is defined as a ‘multiplicité indistincte ou qualitative’. Roughly translated, our experience of time involves a multiplicity of interpenetration ‘and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought’ (Bergson, 1950, quotes in Breeur, 2001: 181). Our experiences of time are therefore not delineated into linear narrative vs post-fordist fragmentation, but rather ‘simultaneity’ and ‘juxtaposition’ (Bergson, 1950). The concept of multiplicity is further substantiated by the suggestion that

...we do not live, after all once in a pre-modern, once in a modern, once in a postmodern world. All three ‘worlds’ are but abstract idealizations of mutually incoherent aspects of the single life-process which we try our best to make as coherent as we can manage. (Bauman, 1992: 11)

One might conclude from Bauman’s proposition a coexistence of narrative and post-fordist times, simultaneously permeating everyday consciousness; in other words, a kind of synthesis and negotiation of temporalities experienced through continuity and yet inextricably tied to the particularity of context. For this provides a means of theorizing gendered relations to just-in-time-labour beyond the epistemological problematics of duality and alienation.
1. According to the ECO (2003: 1) ‘only 9 percent of male employees work part-time, compared with 43 percent of female employees’. Moreover, women constitute around 69 percent of administrative, personal services and customer service occupations while men constitute around 69 percent of managers, officials and skilled tradespeople.

References


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