

## Time, Self and Reified Artefacts

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# Time, Self and Reified Artefacts

David Knights and Ali Yakhlef

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**ABSTRACT.** Discursive accounts of time tend to focus on a deconstruction of taken-for-granted notions of clock time, restricted to linear measurable units. By contrast the present article examines some of the discourses and practices deployed by managers in their attempts to control time; in the final instance, it shows how time can be a mystery that escapes such managerial pursuits and preoccupations. More specifically, we draw on Levinas's ideas on time and the 'Other', and use two managerial discourses to illustrate how reification (through the use of technological and institutional artefacts) as attempts to control time tend to result in a proliferation of participation but, equally, an insistence on participation may invoke an intensification of control through reification. Reified relationships invariably result in a perpetual return to the Other, or what we have called participation. However, to varying degrees, our participatory mode is not possible without reification. Yet 'relationships' cannot be completely delegated to rationally calculating devices, formal institutions, or markets. Cooperation has its source not in reified forms of rationality (nor of irrationality), but in the human encounter with the Other. The organizational, social order is based on personal relations and personal responsibilities. **KEY WORDS** • credit scoring • outsourcing contract • participation • personal relations • reification • time and the 'Other'

## Introduction

In this article we focus our attention on the configuring of time in terms of an interplay of relations of social engagement (participation) and its absence (reification). Reification, or the treatment of time as if it were independent of human construction, tends to involve unilinear discourses of time structured around a preoccupation with the self. Participation, where time is tied to the

contexts in which it is entrenched, by contrast, is associated with a non-linear temporal discourse, revolving around ‘time and the “other”’ (Levinas, 1979/1986), or time for the other. When we participate with others in an engaged fashion, we often lose consciousness of time since our concerns become focused on the quality of our relationships and their outcomes, and not on the quantity of time expended. By contrast, when social engagement is absent we tend to treat time as a fixed, scarce and reified entity that we must limit or control as a way of securing an archetype for the self (Game, 1991; Clough, 1992; Knights, 1995). Rather than viewing ‘things’ as placed in fixed boxes – *I* and *It* – the article suggests a view of time as a connective interplay of intersubjective relations and discourses.

There is little doubt that time is a scarce resource for individuals and organizations, and recently it has become an important topic in social science (Adam, 1990; Clark, 1990) and management theory (Bluedorn, Denhart and Rachel 1988). Much of this research has been engaged in a deconstruction of our taken-for-granted orientations to time as restricted to linear units measured by the technical artefact of the clock. Here the concern is to demonstrate the mediation of time through social relations within the context of social activities and events, for example in terms of celebrations, *rites de passage*, family, and gender obligations. For organizations, however, time is problematic and a target for control, management and manipulation.

In this article, we want to argue that while time may be treated as an object falling prey to managerial attempts to bring it under control, at the same time it can be a mystery (Levinas, 1979/1986) that escapes such pursuits and preoccupations. In their attempts to control time, managers resort to various discursive practices of reification that invariably are thwarted by the resilience of social relations to manipulation. Consistently, events and situations demand or invite the participation of subjects in the discursive practices of organizations and these are often resistant to rigid time controls. In order to illustrate how the discourses of reification and participation not only co-configure each other but also lend a degree of unpredictability if not precariousness to the management of time in organizations, we draw upon vignettes<sup>1</sup> from our research in financial services and outsourcing of information technology. Our argument is that attempts to control time through reification tend to result in a proliferation of time-rich participation but, equally, an insistence on participation may invoke an intensification of control that reduces time to a pale but predictable image of itself.

The article is organized as follows. First, we examine the development of the discourse of credit scoring as a technology of managing financial risk in a reified manner, focusing on some of the incidental outcomes that lead to more time-rich participatory, face-to-face interactions. Second, we discuss how the practice of outsourcing contracts as an attempt at controlling time has placed

higher demands on senior managers to become more engaged and participatory with IT matters. Finally, in a concluding section, we discuss the implications of this analysis for the theorization of time, management and organization.

### **Reification through Technological Artefacts**

The first example<sup>2</sup> focuses on historically changing modes of providing consumer credit. In examining consumer credit, we discuss how the shift from 'knowing the customer' personally through 'real-time' engagement to a technology (a technological artefact known as credit scoring) in which the customer is reified in terms of their risk profile has produced a gap in the credit market. In order to fill this gap, some credit companies have returned to a participatory, time-intensive-based interaction with customers, requiring more personal forms of risk assessment. In effect, the strict control of time and risk through the technological artefact of credit scoring has left the market wide open to a more participatory mode of managing time, risk and the customer – door-to-door provision of sub-prime credit. However, not all alternatives to credit scoring within the sub-prime market take this extreme time-rich form of participation; a near-prime provision adopts a system of IT surveillance almost as remote as credit scoring but based on the more personal history of the client's repayment record. Although we are only drawing on this research as a brief vignette, the original primary data was extensive.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with the early history of consumer credit, it can be shown that in the sixteenth century, financial services were integrated with the consumer goods marketplace economy, for they were functions of each other (Davis, 1966). Consumer credit emerged almost simultaneously with the development of retailing, since many early shopping transactions were done on a (free) credit basis. Not all of this credit came free, however, for numerous shopkeepers supplemented their retailing returns (as continues today) by advancing loans (for example on clothes) at high rates of interest. Credit made it possible to spend without earning, thus severing the connection, at least in the short term, between labour and consumption.<sup>4</sup> Both of these forms of credit, of course, continued in working-class communities well into the twentieth century, when consumers bought goods on 'tick' at their corner shop or borrowed at very high rates of interest through clothing clubs and weekly collections of their loan repayment instalments in the home. The decline of 'free' credit and the shift of clothing club agents into full-scale money lending may account for the rapid growth of licensed money lending in what is now known as the *sub-prime* market for credit.

Up until the 1980s the sub-prime market and the mainstream market for bank loans shared a similar interpersonal, time-rich, face-to-face approach to assess-

ing risk. Both relied on the skills of their personnel (the bank manager or the collecting agent) rather than any technical device to assess risk, but this is where the similarities end. For banks relied on the customer coming to the branch to convince the bank that they were reliable and trustworthy but also their credit history would be checked and, even then, often collateral security such as property deeds would be insisted upon for loans of any size. By contrast, the sub-prime lenders relied largely on high rates of interest, backed up by the agent's personal knowledge of the customer, to cover the risk.

Since the Second World War, credit has been one of the fastest growing sectors of western economies<sup>5</sup> partly because of a more secure technology of 'credit scoring',<sup>6</sup> where an impersonal technique of assessing the risk displaces the time-intensive interpersonal methods of the past that were always prone to failure. Credit scoring could be seen as a new 'technology of the self' (see Foucault, 1988) – a reified practice designed to substitute a technical procedure for a personal or participatory assessment. A credit relationship involves an asymmetry of knowledge or information where credit providers seek to fill that gap by means of artefacts (for example, credit scoring) designed to remove the unpredictable features of credit consumption (Leysdon and Thrift, 1999). Credit scoring is then about arresting the fleeting nature of knowledge and the flux and flow of time.

At the same time, credit scoring is a technology that involves the reification of categories of consumers in accordance with technically generated risk profiles. These are constructed through a detailed recording of an individual's credit transaction history combined with standardized personal data that are seen as predictive of creditability. Credit-scoring companies constitute a variant on what Foucault (1979) referred to as the 'Panopticon' where the mere possibility of total surveillance generates considerable self-discipline on the part of those who are the target of power. Subjects who seek credit are reified into objects of a financial gaze within a specific timeframe – a practice perpetrated by 'infomediaries' (for example, Experian in the UK) that specialize in the collection, storing, retrieval and sale of customer data and information relevant for credit companies. While credit scoring provides mainstream providers with a more predictable and secure market, it also has the effect of depriving large proportions of the population of credit because they cannot pass through the restrictive threshold that is a function of the credit-scoring technology.

Partly as a result of this, the market for credit has seen something of an explosion in the supply of, and demand for, other forms of credit that plug the gap left by more precise and technical calculations of credit risk through credit scoring. In effect, the risk-averse behaviour of the mainstream credit providers resulted in a broader sector of the population being denied access to credit or pushed back on illegal moneylenders, charging stratospheric rates of interest. The sub-prime market of face-to-face delivery was thus given a boost by the

more restrictive lending practices of the mainstream providers in the prime market. For it was not just a matter of potential borrowers being turned away from the prime market by credit scoring but also choosing to exclude themselves because of the fear of rejection and the stigma attached to being constructed as a non-trustworthy subject. The major problem with technical methods of credit scoring and standard rates of interest is that it is a technology constructed on the basis of a linear time conception of the subject who could be seen to have a stable or continuously improving occupational, and hence credit, career. In short, it demands an excess of order, stability and organization with respect to potential consumers of credit. Recent research and predictions of the future suggest that consumers may not necessarily have continuous employment and lifetime careers, and/or the stable and predictable trajectory that are the lifeblood of credit-scoring techniques. For example, contingent or non-permanent employment forms around 7 per cent (1.8 million workers) of the UK working population and, for men, almost doubled between 1988 and 1999 (Cam, Purcell and Tailby, 2003). Also in our personal lives, stability has declined dramatically resulting, for example, in one in every three marriages ending in divorce,<sup>7</sup> married households being a minority unit and a huge increase in single parenting and single households.<sup>8</sup> In 2000 only 37 per cent of the population of Europe lived as part of a nuclear family and this is expected to decrease to 34 per cent by 2005 (The *Guardian*, 23 March 2002). This increase in the proportion of single households, combined with growing divorce rates, must mean a less linear stable population whose conventional credit rating may be more precarious as a result.

Reading off the subject from a series of lifestyle characteristics in a universal manner then may not only result in the exclusion of many trustworthy consumers but also, on the other side, could admit many philanderers.<sup>9</sup> Treating the consumer as a universal subject with a stable linear history can then be a damaging side effect of the technology of credit scoring. The sub-prime and near-prime market has awoken to this and the growth and profitability of their business have aroused the prime-market providers at least to dip their toes in the water by developing or acquiring subsidiaries to service these alternative markets. The prime or mainstream found themselves hung by their own credit scoring (reified) petard and thereby missing out on a highly profitable and expanding market that required them to offer, in one part of their business at least, a more time-intensive participative customer relationship. Interestingly, the banks also found another disadvantage of remote trading through credit scoring in that the absence of a personal relationship with customers reduced the opportunities for cross-selling other products and services or widening the customer base through developing business with their own customers' social networks. Once again the control of time proves costly in terms of lost potential business.

The two types of credit providers that have filled the gap left by the risk-averse strategies of the mainstream – the sub-prime and the near prime – correspond broadly to the much-vaunted rhetoric that attempts to make a distinction between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ economy. Many consumers excluded from the mainstream are perfectly capable of being responsible borrowers and, as a consequence, these suppliers of credit have proliferated to fill the vacuum left by the more restrictive prime market. Paradoxically these providers either rely upon (sub-prime) or return (near prime) to a more time-rich personal and participative relationship with their clients since they eschew the more reified methods of constituting borrowers through credit scoring. While the sub-prime provider is dependent wholly on face-to-face relations, the interactive approach of near-prime suppliers is usually through remote means such as telephone calls or contact centres or through the internet. Instead of rejecting credit applications because of some standardized categorization or even a bad credit record from the past, the near prime allow credit at rates of interest that are considered appropriate to the risk and which rise immediately should there be a default. The interest rate ratchet policy is clearly a disincentive on consumers to default whereas a good record can secure better terms of borrowing in the future. It means that subjects stigmatized by credit-scoring technology have the potential to retrieve their rating through developing a good repayment record. Consequently, the relationship between borrower and lender is in real-time and flexible with respect to an ongoing track record rather than based on static and reified assessments that only worsen at each failed attempt to break through the credit-scoring threshold (another reason for self-exclusion). While not as time-rich or participatory as the sub-prime, it is nonetheless much more engaging with the customer as a real-life person whose circumstances and risk profile change over time and should therefore be assessed in relation to actual behaviour, not in terms of a simulated model of the consumer that is reified at a particular point in time.

### **Reification through Institutional Artefacts**

The second example is concerned with information technology outsourcing and there we discuss the use of contract (an institutional artefact) in the context of information technology outsourcing. For instance, through an outsourcing contract, companies are assumed to devolve information technology (IT) activities to a third party and to devote the attention and time released to issues that senior managers believe to be their core concern. However, in the cases under consideration, this displacement of organizational activities through outsourcing contracts (reification) has led to increased senior managers’ and end-users’ participation in managing IT matters. The reification of the outsourced activities

transforms the socially dense activities of managing technology into a set of inscription forms (i.e. numbers) requiring senior managers' and end-users' attention and participation. What seems to emerge from these scenarios is that where organizations attempt to control time through remote means (reification), frequently they recreate the need for more interpersonal engagement and participation. The bulk of material drawn on consists of documents (such as internal reports, IT strategy directives, minutes of meetings, consultants' reports, annual reports and so on) and a large pool of information elicited during 40 personal interviews with senior managers, IT coordinators, CEOs and deputy CEOs, and end-users. All the respondents were involved in the outsourcing decision and/or have experienced the shift from in-house integration to market coordination of IT activities. The sectors studied include retail banking (Föreningsbanken AB, henceforth FB), insurance (Wasa), financial services (Handelsbanken Finans AB, henceforth HF), group retailing (Kooperativa Förbundet, henceforth KF), oil industry (British Petroleum, henceforth BP) and municipal administration (Stockholm City, henceforth SC). Although all the cases under consideration put different emphasis on the drives behind outsourcing, they all agree that by outsourcing their IT activities they will have more time for what they consider to be their more central concerns.

An outsourcing contract substitutes a participatory mode of managing internal activities and interactions for a reified mode of coordinating social relationships, economic processes and interests. Within the corporate rhetoric of the last few decades, outsourcing has been regarded as one of the most significant means of restructuring the corporation (Quinn, 1999; Gilley and Rasheed, 2000), spreading from manufacturing components and information systems into a range of other areas including the service industries. For instance, a company such as Microsoft outsources almost everything – from the manufacturing of its computer software to the distribution of its software products, hoping to focus the organization on its primary area of competitive advantage: the writing of software code (Useem and Harder, 2000). Richard Branson's Virgin – a multi-activity business operating in airlines, railways, financial services and high-street stores – is really only a brand name with all of its businesses outsourced to the point at which it is generally classified as a networked organization. In the reasoning of most industry observers, the trend towards outsourcing is on the increase.

In comparison to vertical integration, outsourcing is claimed to reduce manufacturing costs and investment in plant equipment (Bettis, Bradley and Hamel, 1992; Quinn, 1992). However, the motivations for outsourcing have evolved from this primary concern with cost reduction to an emphasis on strategic purposes such as the focus on core competencies (Quinn, 1992; Dess et al., 1995; Diromualdo and Gurbaxani, 1998; Gilley and Rasheed, 2000). By outsourcing non-core activities, firms are assumed to increase managerial focus and



resource allocation to those tasks that they do best (Quinn, 1992, 1999; Gilley and Rasheed, 2000). Within this discourse, outsourcing allows a firm to devote more time and attention to its core competency and to what increases its chances for a sustained competitive advantage (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Quinn, 1992, 1999). Whether an activity falls within the confines of the internal organizational boundaries depends upon a firm's perception of how central that activity is, and on the opportunity costs in terms of time, space, management attention, and other resources that could be made available through outsourcing.

In effect, outsourcing means that an organization farms out to external suppliers some of the activities that have hitherto been performed in house, and becomes a purchaser of services in a just-in-time fashion through a contractual relationship with the supplier. This dynamic means that in opting for outsourcing, the firm becomes involved in deal making (Useem and Harder, 2000), managing papers, contracts, specifications, benchmarking, setting prices, assessing performances and so on. Managing activities from a distance, through contracts, leads to a distinct supplier–customer relation, where market mechanisms are meant to be the governing rule. The disambiguation of this relation was made possible through the invention of a set of new routines and practices. For instance, decisions concerning firms' IT requirements are scrutinized and assessed more closely from the perspective of their contribution to the business, since now IT costs are 'real' ones, unlike the internal IT costs paid to former sister IT departments. The firms feel that they are now in more control of their IT costs than before:

When we had Apiron [former IT subsidiary] we were not in control of what was going on there. Our relation with it was ambiguous: we were owners and customers at the same time. Apiron just existed; we did not choose it as our supplier. As IT users, we were not supposed to be able to evaluate what we got from our IT subsidiary. Sometimes it overcharged us and sometimes undercharged us. In contrast, with EDS (the new supplier), the relation is discrete, the roles are well defined and the market works as a regulating mechanism. (KF representative)

In a similar fashion, an IT coordinator at HF says: 'It is easier to control the performance of external sources because in the event of failure one can demand compensation from suppliers, something which one cannot do in connection with one's own staff.' Indeed, now that the firms are dealing with external suppliers, they are being forced to define their IT needs and requests more carefully and in formal ways, that is to say, in *writing*. All these new routines for formulating, computing and evaluating the contribution of IT to their businesses have led to the accumulation of documents, the specification and comparison of prices and quantities at weekly and monthly meetings with suppliers and consultants and other IT experts. To take an example of FB which has only outsourced its computer operations: the organization's meetings with its supplier

cover eight kinds of meetings including price setting, invoicing, service quality, ordering routines, access to online services, penalties and so on. Most such encounters are conducted in a proximal, participatory fashion – an outcome that was not anticipated.

Prior to outsourcing, documentation was poor because people interacted face to face, relying on the oral medium rather than on documenting things when writing or amending systems. Information was largely in the heads of those who developed the systems. In this way, the firms felt that they were dependent upon those people. But now that they have outsourced their IT department, they have to be clear and more precise in their dealings with their suppliers, among other things, by documenting all interactions with them. In this connection, the firms were hard put ‘to learn how to explicitly formulate their needs and they have to do it in writing, unlike in pre-outsourcing periods when many exchanges took place informally and orally’ (SC representative). From this perspective, outsourcing has meant an increased bureaucratization for ‘you are now compelled to make a precise description of problems, needs and requirements – a task which can be difficult and time consuming. Before, you could get things done fairly quickly by talking to people at the IT department’ (KF representative). IT purchases, applications improvements or system amendments are now regulated according to formal rules and procedures – practices which have proven detrimental to the oft-vaunted flexibility associated with IT outsourcing. In cases where firms resort to multi-sourcing, that is the outsourcing of different areas to different suppliers, the practices of monitoring, coordinating and streamlining the inputs of the various suppliers will put even more strain on flexibility. Of course, such efforts at integrating the inputs of many suppliers require a great deal of time, discussion and participatory interactions.

Thus, senior managers who attempted to banish IT from their organization as a non-core activity to be managed from a distance, now find themselves in the throes of IT matters: ‘We have to admit that we are at loss to understand IT developments; a year and half ago we farmed out a large part of our IT activities. Today we are perplexed to see that IT activities are growing again inside the organization. For instance, the number of client-servers has now grown to six’ (Wasa representative). Although IT was regarded as a non-core activity, it was through outsourcing IT activities that IT matters found their way onto the senior manager’s table in the shape of abstract forms of inscriptions, tables and benchmarks. It is also because of outsourcing that senior managers found themselves assuming increasing responsibility for IT matters. Furthermore, ironically enough, it is through outsourcing that some believe that the process of integrating IT within the business activities has started: ‘We have managed to bring IT matters to the forefront not only at the operational level but also at top management level. Management has become more and more involved in IT matters: evaluating it, measuring it and taking decisions about it’ (SC repre-

sentative). A similar view is also upheld at Wasa: 'Senior executives have become more interested in IT questions. Five years ago, they would look down upon this as an unnecessary cost area, today it is much discussed by the leading team.' All the firms claimed that senior managers and the leading team have developed an 'interest' in IT, since they now feel able to make statements about it and to pose the 'right' questions. At the same time, they are made more accountable – through a process of 'responsibilization' – for their choices, their inaction or action concerning IT. Managing the IT contract has imposed a number of routines pertinent to the control and monitoring of the supplier. Outsourcing does not seem to deliver what it promises, proving to be a burden, an order that disciplines and imposes responsibilities, nibbling away at the dreams of being in control of time.

What seems to emerge from this brief scenario is that attempts at solving the problems of managing IT through a contract have ultimately created new areas that require direct engagement. By opting for a reified form of managing IT, a firm transforms its direct engagement with managing the hustle and bustle of everyday activities of the IT department into managing contracts, reporting, billing and accounting techniques that usually come in quantitative, economic terms, such as figures, benchmarks, quality criteria, ratios and so on. In this case, an outsourcing contract turns the IT department activities into reified inscriptions that are amenable to control since figures are unfettered by the vicissitudes of direct or participatory engagement. For once reduced to an inscription form, an immutable mobile (Latour, 1988) reified host of numbers, IT activities have found their way into senior managers' offices. To the extent that senior managers thrive on numbers and rejoice in economic reifications, they have developed an interest in IT matters as represented to them in numbers – an area that prior to outsourcing was the preserve of technologists. The outsourcing contract has created a context which has increased managers' participation and engagement.

Contracts, like other institutional artefacts such as laws, rules, agreements and trust, are a reification that is meant to detemporalize and deterritorialize social interactions. They do away with individuals' engagement, neutralize their immediate impulses, instincts, desires, and (sometimes violent) conflicts. They regulate (in advance) conflicting social interactions and settle differences between people independently of their emotional changes. They reduce circumstantial changes in the relations of forces holding among people (Lévy, 1998). There is no need to define each situation anew in all its minute details, and the pattern of actions can be extended to other, similarly perceived, situations. Predetermined patterns of behaviour serve as guidelines and control mechanisms for future patterns of behaviour. The claim is that they are in-advance control modes of human conduct (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) because they are meant to create institutionally defined situations for actors to behave and

interact without the full impact of direct interpersonal engagement. In this regard, institutions are assumed to render interactions among individuals predictable regardless of the time and space in which they occur. To some degree, individuals become able to predict one another's moves. Since their expectation from one another is reciprocal, actors would save time and spare the efforts of calculating all possible alternatives that may be taken by the other. Institutions constitute a means for actors to stabilize their actions and interactions. The implication is that in an institutionalized context, each partner's action neither comes as a surprise to the other, nor is it a source of danger (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This detemporalized system of governance is assumed to do away with face-to-face intercourses among individuals, since fairly clear-cut rules are used to mediate among them, with instructions prescribing the tasks and duties assigned to each party. Maybe this is what explains organizations' focus on reified institutional and technological artefacts as modes of interaction and coordination that are neither time sensitive nor proximal.

### **The Roller Coaster of Participation and Reification**

Technological and institutional artefacts are reifying devices that serve as mediators to regulate social relationships among individuals without them being physically present to one another. They are expected to stabilize individuals and things in time and space, placing them in 'fixed' categories and boxes (I and It). Face-to-face systems of vetting customers for credit were found deficient in many respects: time consuming, labour intensive, over-reliant on personal judgement, prone to risk since local managers' decision may not be attuned to social, economic and global changes, and too dependent upon social contexts (Leyshon and Thrift, 1999). Credit scoring – reification through technology – held promises to solve most of the limitations associated with the old method. It was seen to be: more responsive to changes, able to expedite and standardize the decision-making process and loving the prospect of reducing the impact of time-based social encounters and interpersonal intercourse. The technology of credit scoring reduces a potential borrower's financial status to a set of data. This is a far cry from the older technique of distributing credit through a door-to-door system or through face-to-face assessments of risk by a bank manager. In this participatory mode, an agent or bank manager can assess the risk through personal knowledge of the customer. While the credit-scoring technology was cost effective, it inadvertently excluded potentially profitable customers. This forced such customers either into the sub-prime market of face-to-face or near-prime telephone/internet provision. Some anxiety for lenders was generated by the lack of closure but the pricing structure (rates of interest exceeding 100 per cent) compensated adequately for any defaults. Rather than basing the assess-

ment of credit risk solely on an analytical process of dissection, differentiation and non-participatory time, the participatory, interpersonal practice of credit management relies on the connective interplay between embodied subjects (I and Thou) negotiating their distinct yet asymmetrical power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980).

However, as Callon (1998) observes:

to ensure a contract is not broken, to limit the actions that can be undertaken within the framework of this contract, the agents concerned have to mobilize a whole range of elements . . . These objects allow the framing and stabilization of actions, while simultaneously providing an opening on to other worlds, thus constituting leakage points where overflowing can occur. (p. 18)

Any framing produces overflowing, and any attempt to disentangle and reify social relations produces new attachments. Consequently, the history of credit provision reflects these shifts back and forth between impersonal reified and particular face-to-face provision.

By the same token, the outsourcing contract reduces production processes, relationships and social interactions into a set of written inscription forms which were thought to be a solution to the problems of managing IT in house. Indeed, technologists were accused of being technology-biased and inattentive to the business needs of the organization they were meant to serve. They were depicted as difficult to interact with partly because they had developed their own strategic agenda and technological jargon (for example, CASE, CICS, MIPS and so on) that felt threatening to 'non techies'. Outsourcing is regarded as a way of solving social and political relationships among humans, by reducing them to objects and freezing (reifying) them in time. A parallel is to be found in Fabian's (1983) account of anthropologists who disguise the fact that ethnographer and informant are embedded in a common field of political and economic relationships only by describing contemporary peoples, cultures, or societies as existing 'back then', instead of 'over there'. In other words, the creation of objects assumes that the present 'there', in this case, in the non-West, is the pre-history of 'here', in the West, and the future 'there' is projected as approximating the past or the present of 'here' in the West. Moreover, according to Fabian, anthropologists, who usually write for fellow academics, expend more time and energy on data collection and text production than on sharing the time of the peoples they are studying. Fabian's argument is that communication is a fundamentally physical exchange, relying on the physicality of the word, or as Walter Ong (1967) has put it, the time spent together in conversation, dialogue, gatherings, and activities. Ong critiques anthropologists' privileging of these aspects of culture (costumes, transcripts, word lists, public ceremonies) because these are more easily observed and analysed by non-participants at an emotional remove from their subjects' daily lives. He adds that modern anthropologists can only

commune with their 'unforgettable people' when they are finally left alone with their notebooks to contemplate them in solitude.

Of course, we also cannot but recognize here our own guilt for the way in which the research for this article has been conducted and we therefore have to acknowledge how our analysis serves equally as an exemplification of the reduction of time to a reified image of itself in the relationships we have depicted. The only saving grace is that we are not oblivious to the reductionist character of social science and our own work when it comes to time. It has been argued recently that our 'orientation to time' frequently involves us reducing the past to the present as we bring it into the service of securing the self in the here and now (Knights, forthcoming). While such security of the self is ultimately unattainable, it does not prevent us from pursuing it, and time and space simply become pawns in its service. Having said this, however, there have been equally as stringent critiques of anthropologists and other social scientists who, in their concern to get close emotionally to their subjects, 'go native' (Tresch, 2001) and thus abandon the concerns of social science altogether.

A historical vignette of practices within medieval monasteries seems to support the argument that we have presented through our examples. It provides a poignant example of the paradox between reifying time in order to save it for something else and time-intensive participation. The ultimate aim of the monks was to seclude themselves from worldly activities in order to spend as much time of the day as possible on their ascetic life (Kieser, 1987). To those ends, they developed the first highly rationalized work organizations in the West. According to Kieser (1987), the Benedictine monastery is credited with bringing a new concept of timing into western life. Monks made a concerted effort to ensure that worldly services such as farming, cooking, eating, cleaning and so on were conducted in a timely fashion. This timeliness was regarded as such an important issue that St Benedict entrusted it to the care of the abbot – the equivalent of the CEO in the modern corporation. Monks used sundials and water clocks to establish the length of time a certain task took with a view to controlling its timeliness. This concern with rationalizing time, with minimizing working time in order to maximize time for praying had led medieval monastery orders to the creation of a highly rationalized work organization and, correlatively, productive activities that led to the accumulation of excessively unwanted wealth. In becoming preoccupied with preserving or advancing this wealth, paradoxically there was not much time left for prayers and for leading an ascetic life.

In Kieser's words: 'they [the monks] considerably improved the techniques of smelting, glass production and agriculture. They became pioneers in the perfection and distribution of watermills and windmills. Their workshops resembled factories in which water-driven machinery was widely applied' (p. 118). Their planning, accounting and forecasting techniques were superior to

those found in 'worldly' institutions in the economy as a whole. In this context, routines of how to carry out tasks had to be defined and blueprints or plans of how to accomplish them were drawn up. When the monks differed in their views as to the efficiency of techniques, discussions intensified, culminating in *even* more rationalized routines and techniques. Such 'scientific' inquiries led to the blossoming of handwriting and documentation of routines designed to facilitate the socialization and recruitment of new members (Kieser, 1987).

As an attempt to secure more time for themselves, Benedictine monks focused their attention on 'light symbolic labour', farming out or what we call outsourcing the hard physical work to serfs. However, even when they were relieved from the hard work, they turned their attention to decoration of churches, elaboration of clothes, breeding useless animals, painting pictures, decorating books and enjoying opulent meals. The Benedictine monks adopted a pompous style, dressing in luxurious garments and treating themselves and their guests to exorbitant meals. Most such activities collided with their ultimate aim: refraining from luxury and lavish consumption and maximizing time for contemplation and prayer. It was difficult for medieval monastery orders to bring economic success in balance with their ascetic life. Just like their contemporary managers, monks' reliance on reification, the investment in rationalized, time-saving production and management techniques fostered new participatory interactions, engagements and relationships related to worldly matters. The economic success required more complex management and financial systems, activities from which they initially tried to become distant through the adoption of reified rationalized management, outsourcing practices and production techniques.

Medieval monks, in their effort to become time rich but money poor, ended up by becoming money rich but time poor. By the monastery order's standards, this was a complete failure, since the rationalization (read reification) in Weber's (1930) sense of the word, had led to an 'iron cage' which left no room for the conduct of life according to the ethical principles of participants (Kieser, 1987).

Reified artefacts and rationalized systems of production are not only mediators of reality but also co-producers of the very reality (relationships, activities and processes) they were meant to mediate. For an artefact (be it technological, such as an accounting device like credit scoring or institutional such as an outsourcing contract) is not only a 'delegate' whose actions are substituted for the actions of humans in a particular context, but it also shapes human action by imposing prescriptions back on the behaviour of humans engaged by the scenarios they define (Latour, 1988). Hence, the artefact prescribes qualities and possibilities to bring to the scene, the particular place, and certain degrees of competency to enact and exploit the potential latent in the artefact. This prescribing of qualities and behaviours to humans is an *event*, thus taking place in

concrete time. Artefacts do not only give rise to events that take place, but they make space and place for those events to happen (Derrida, 1976; Casey, 1997: 312); they are the conditions that make possible *platiated* events (Casey, 1997: 312). Such happenings and performances are goal oriented, situated, and time anchored, that is, taking place in a concrete place and time. The outsourcing contract has made senior management and end-users behave differently. It has not given them an escape from time and place, but has become itself the scene for interaction and performance. It has become the very 'place' for events to occur.

'Relationships' cannot be delegated to rationally calculating devices, formal institutions or markets without remainder or repercussion. Instead, cooperation in organizations and markets is generated from personal relations and personal responsibilities. Cooperation has its source not in reified forms of rationality (nor of irrationality), but in the human encounter with the Other. Attempts to decontextualize cooperation into a totality of predictable forms of rationality can never include the Other without it being reduced to an object. However, the constant encounter with the Other will continuously 'disturb' and destabilize this totality through the demands of being responsible. As Levinas (1979/1986) argues, interpersonal relations play a crucial role in the constitution of the individual. Levinas's perspective is premised on the interplay of the phenomenological and existential understanding of time as an accomplishment of the individual being, on the one hand, and as something given by the decontextualized representation of the clock, on the other.

Reality cannot be engaged within an unmediated, naked way, however. Our participation and engagement with reality is to a large extent mediated through diverse reified forms: linguistic, institutional and technological artefacts. Our experience of the world is always mediated: 'language is the prime and original means of time-space distantiation, elevating human activity beyond the immediacy of the experience of animals' (Giddens, 1991: 23). Or as Castells (1996) puts it:

[W]hen critics of electronic media argue that the new symbolic environment does not represent 'reality', they implicitly refer to an absurdly primitive notion of 'uncoded' real experience that never existed. All realities are communicated through symbols [and artefacts] . . . In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived. (p. 373)

Legitimate authority whether in personal finance or information technology is perpetuated precisely by 'drawing upon its virtual credit' (Judovitz, 2001: 21). In experiencing the world and the 'Other' we do it mediatedly, *through* various artefacts. To varying degrees, even our participatory mode is mediated through reification. As Levinas (1947/1987) makes clear, our relationship to time is particularly prone to be mediated through artefacts that reify it: 'One can think



that authentic time is originally an ecstasis, yet one buys oneself a watch; despite the nudity of existence, one must as far as possible be decently clothed' (pp. 59–60).

### Conclusion

This article has been concerned to examine two processes of social organization that have a particular relationship to time – reification or the remote management and control of 'time' and participation or the way that management and their representatives might be engaged and embodied in 'timeless' relationships. While at one level these seem to be in competition with each other, they tend also to be in a co-productive relationship in which one (without necessary intention) results in a proliferation of the other. More than this, it could be argued that each is implicated in the constitution of the other such that reified or remote relations could not exist were it not for the participatory relations they seek to displace. Nor could participation occur in the absence of some authority that is legitimated at a distance in something that we might call 'virtual credit'.

Drawing on Levinas's ideas on time and the 'Other', we have suggested a different way of thinking about some of the reification techniques used by management to control time. Reification through technological and institutional artefacts is among one of the most commonly used techniques for controlling time in organizations. The unbridled use of increasingly more sophisticated technologies and the recourse to (allegedly) more efficient market mechanisms are two significant vectors in the process of a reification of time. Yet as the vignettes discussed in this article have shown, the reified act itself then often stimulates a proliferation of more time-intensive participatory interactions.

Although technological and institutional artefacts promised certain tasks to be carried out more quickly and efficiently, they have often increased the workload of control that requires participatory engagement of individuals, ending up with offsetting the initially expected benefits of time saved. Contrariwise, increases in participatory relationships invoke the realization that more could be managed remotely through reified technological artefacts. We have also argued that remote or reified relations can be counterproductive for management in that not only do they have the propensity to leave subjects (staff, customers) bereft of meaning, but also the result can be a loss of business through automatic exclusion (or the accumulation of unwanted wealth, as in the case of medieval monks).

Our analysis has resonance with that of Callon (1998: 1) where he draws the distinction between the abstract supply and demand mechanisms of markets contrasted with the ordinary personal, situated experiences and interactions of subjects in marketplaces. Just as in participative relations, subjects lose the

sense of time that reified relations are bent on controlling, and agents within markets may well resist ‘calculative rationality . . . because they are “embedded” in the social or cultural frames which turn them away from it’ (p. 5). However, Callon resists the idea of agents either being framed by the context (network) or constituting it as if they were in some way ever separate: ‘Both agent and context are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin’ (p. 8). In this sense, it is necessary to see the context or network as no more than a description of ‘the associations of its constitutive agents’ (p. 9). Our notion of reified and participative relations has the same ontological status in defining the associations of its constitutive agents such that it is not possible to separate out the relations from the agents and vice versa. Similarly, the reified and participative relations are implicated in each other in the sense that, as our examples seek to show, there are perpetual shifts in and between them. Cost- and control-driven managers pursue strategies of organization designed to reduce time to a rigid reified image of itself which leaves in its wake a set of unintended consequences that force them to return to more time-rich and participative relationships. The flexibility of such time-intense relations combined with ever-increasing innovations that promise the best of both worlds, however, lead managers back into the time-control potential of reified technologies and relationships.

### Notes

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1. Vignettes provide us with a theoretically grounded, critical illumination of ‘what happens’ to people in everyday life (Finch, 1985: 114, 1987). However, there is nothing terribly novel or exotic about this methodological process or the events to which it exposes us.
2. We draw here on an Economic and Social Sciences Research Council study R2700 5696. Research colleagues on this project were: Andrew Leyshon, Catrina Alferoff, Paola Signoretta and Dawn Burton.
3. This was conducted through extensive documentary research, interviews and non-participant observation. In total, 64 interviews, 9 participant observation sessions and 10 focus groups were conducted (participant observation sessions and follow-up interviews with agents in home service insurance and credit including the near-prime market; focus groups with a diverse range of individuals with follow-up interviews).
4. We are indebted to Nicolas O’Shaughnessy for this phrase (personal communication).

5. For example, over the decade beginning in 1990, UK credit increased by as much as 1300 per cent. See [www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/TSDtimezone.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/TSDtimezone.asp).
6. There have been few studies of the development of credit scoring (see Shaoul, 1996).
7. 'The divorce rate in the United Kingdom is now nearly one per two marriages, and marriage itself is in decline. There were 352,000 weddings in England and Wales in 1987 compared with 273,000 in 1997' (Item from the Smart Marriages Archive, reproduced in the Divorce Statistics Collection – <http://www.divorcereform.org/mel/rmillendivbritain02.html>).
8. For the first time, the number of 'nuclear' families in the USA – married parents living with their kids – has dropped below 25 per cent of all households. The Census Bureau data offer some clues as to what has happened. The Report says that as the nuclear family numbers have declined, the number of couples living out of wedlock has skyrocketed in the last ten years, up more than 70 per cent since 1990. In addition, the number of women raising children without a father at home also surged up, 25 per cent during the last decade (see <http://www.truthcast.com/agape/010515censusstats.htm>).
9. Many consumers are allowed to run up credit card and bank account debts of massive proportions knowing that as long as they own no assets they can simply go bankrupt and not have to repay their debts. It could be argued that the frantic competition for market share leaves the credit card companies vulnerable to major scams of this kind that could be classified as a form of white-collar crime. This would be more difficult to accomplish if the relationships between lender and borrower were less reified and remote.

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