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Managerial nostalgia: projecting a golden future

Managerial
nostalgia

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Abstract This article seeks to further understand the significance of “organizational nostalgia” for processes of organizational change and to develop the mirror concept “managerial nostalgia”. If nostalgia is a longing for a paradisaical past, nostalgia refers to a longing for a heavenly future, a desire that is central to change-talk and change-initiatives in organizations. The meaning and role of nostalgia will be clarified in this paper by comparing and contrasting it with organizational nostalgia and by analyzing ethnographic studies that provide empirical support to substantiate the analogy. It is argued that the glorification of the past, just as the idealization of the future, are part of internal struggles in which organizational actors try to instigate or resist change by praising or dispraising the collective past, present and future. The argumentation demonstrates the significance of temporal constructions of change and continuity through organizational discourse.

Introduction

Until recent years time has not been a central subject of critical examination within the field of management (Whipp, 1996). Even today, time is usually considered in management studies as a problem that should be resolved through planning, schedules, agendas and deadlines, that is, by regulation and control, whereas the role of time in the theory and practice of management itself is largely left unproblematised (Adam *et al.*, 2002). In order to develop a more time-sensitive view on managing, several organization theorists have started to critically reassess the principles of modern management (e.g. Forray and Woodilla, 2002; Hassard, 1996; Noss, 2002; Purser, 2002) or closely examine daily practices and experiences of managers in organizational life (Koot and Sabelis, 2000; Sabelis, 2002a, b) with an explicit focus on time dimensions.

In this article, attention is drawn to the ways in which “temporal resources”, i.e. the past, present and future, are utilized and deployed in organizational and managerial discourse on change. To shed light on the symbolic construction of the “realities” of transition processes or plans, discursive practices are examined by identifying how organizational actors relate to the past, present and future in everyday talk. The analysis shows how temporal comparisons between different periods or points in time (Albert, 1977) serve to symbolically construct a collective history or a common destiny (see Cohen, 1985). The focus in this article is on temporal comparisons that do not envision a historical continuity, as described in studies of Boden (1997), Forray and Woodilla (2002) or Paalumäki (2000), but rather draw a temporal contrast, a historical schism, between the present and either the past or the future. More specifically, the analysis concentrates on comparisons in which one period is put up against the other

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as desired versus despised, good versus bad, etc., that is, comparisons that express a strong desire for other times ahead or behind, and also, usually more covert, a certain dissatisfaction with the present.

The drawing of a temporal hierarchy is manifest or latent in nostalgic discourse when the past is made to outshine the present. Nostalgia encompasses a range of emotional orientations, the core of which is a longing for the friendly atmosphere, heroic achievements, etc. of bygone days and, underneath, a certain melancholy because of this bygone-ness. Within this specific temporal discourse the past emerges as a lost paradise, with the present as the land that lies east of Eden. Nostalgia has been described in various studies as a dominant emotion in organizations (e.g. Gabriel, 1993; Parker, 2000; Strangleman, 1999). The pervasiveness of nostalgic feelings in organizations was clarified by Gabriel (1993), who contended, on the basis of 126 interviews with members of five different organizations, that nostalgia is "dominating the outlook of numerous organizational members, and even defining the dominant emotional complexion of some organizations" (Gabriel, 1993, p. 119). Indeed, romantic stories about the glory days of a company come up as a recurrent theme in ethnographic descriptions (Gouldner, 1954; Hogema and Van de Padt, 2001; Laurila, 1997; Parker, 2000; Strangleman, 1999; Terkel, 1985; Ybema, 1997).

The logical counterpart of a longing for a paradise lost, is a longing for a paradise yet to come, a desire that, as a playful variation on the concept of nostalgia, might be termed "postalgia". Nostalgia is a modern derivational compound of the ancient Greek words *nostos*(return) and *algos* (grief or distress). With the prefix "post" (regrettably a Latin word) it takes the meaning of a burning desire, not to return, but to go forward, inspired by a certain restlessness or discontent with the present and an anxious desire to go and find out what lies behind the bend, over the mountain, behind the horizon. It may be expressed in utopian ideals or formalized plans, all picturing the future as being fundamentally different from and brighter than today. Often, however, this future desire is accompanied by anxious images of danger or decay, in which a future is sketched that is even darker than an already dark present.

Within an organizational context, postalgia can, above all, be described in managerial plans and policies for organizational change. Managers and management theorists have a clear preference for change-talk over tradition-heeding (Alvesson, 2002; Sabelis, 2002a, b; Sturdy and Grey, 2003) and hence, for forward-looking concepts, such as forecast, planning, vision, etc. (Bate, 1997). The focus is on a future that holds a promise for today. Therefore, postalgia can be seen as a basic emotive trigger for change initiatives and is most typical of the outlook of organizational change agents. As such the concept may help to reveal the discursive production of change and further our understanding of the premises and practices of modern management.

Accounts of organizational nostalgia can be seen as part of a renewed interest in aspects of subjectivity at work (for example, Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2000; Fineman, 1993, 2000). Emotion has long been neglected and undervalued in most approaches to organizational analyses (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995) and good organizations are still often regarded as places where feelings have been managed, designed out, or removed (Fineman, 2000). Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) contend that the experience and expression of negative or intense emotions in the workplace are often regulated by preventing their emergence in the first place or, if this proves unsuccessful, assigning a specific site or moment for emotion display, setting prescriptive or restrictive norms

(e.g., executives telling each other “to get back to the facts”), or normalizing or reframing emotions by expressing them in the guise of rationality. Consistent with these observations, nostalgia usually resides in the ‘unmanaged organization’ (Gabriel, 2000), the organizational underlife (Goffman, 1963), and postalgic expectations are often couched in rationalized models of the future.

The focus in this article is on the role and use of temporal sense making in situations of internally disputed organizational change. It is not the intrapsychic world of the individual that is the center point, but the social performance of nostalgic and postalgic desires, conceiving of cognition and emotion as existing in a specific context, shaped by and shaping social processes (see Patient *et al.*, 2003). It seems likely that both nostalgia and postalgia play a particularly salient role in the intra-organizational struggles over planned change, either intended, instigated or implemented by executives. It will be argued that in internal conflicts the nostalgic voice generally opposes change and indirectly advocates a continuation of past policies by bringing up romanticized memories. Postalgic plans on the other hand, are the typical instruments of the “managerial upperlife”, the “managed organization”, and can be seen as rhetorical devices of change agents to swap an unsatisfying present for a better future. From a political perspective nostalgia can thus be seen as a subtle strategy to resist change, just as postalgia can be understood as a way to win consent for change.

The argument proceeds as follows. A first understanding of the content, form and use of postalgia is developed by means of analogical reasoning (Tsoukas, 1991), i.e. through an analogy with insights into the phenomenon of organizational nostalgia. After examining the images and ideals brought to the fore in nostalgic discourse and analyzing the underlying cognitive, emotional and political dimensions, some defining parallels can be drawn to postalgia as a similar phenomenon. However, analogical reasoning derives its heuristic value from assessing both similarities and dissimilarities, and the latter are particularly significant when defining a new concept against the background of another. So, after having established an idea of the conceptual overlapping, the meaning of organizational postalgia is further specified by pointing out various distinctive features in relation to nostalgia.

The argument is illustrated and developed by analyzing empirical examples drawn from different ethnographic studies. The specific role of nostalgic and postalgic talk is explored in a conflict among managers and staff personnel of an amusement park (Ybema, 1997). A subsequent comparison with other relevant case descriptions by Parker (2000), Laurila (1997) and Strangleman (1999) and an analysis of management theories as typical examples of managerial postalgia helps to give the findings a further empirical underpinning and demonstrates how organizational change agents invoke the past and the future as a means of defining and framing situations for others (see Taylor and Wetherall, 1999). In the concluding section the use of temporal frames during processes of change and time as a significant symbolic resource are discussed, underlining their broader relevance for organization studies.

Organizational nostalgia

Ethnographic research shows that organization members love to dwell on the past (Gabriel, 1993; Gouldner, 1954; Hogema and Van de Padt, 2001; Laurila, 1997; Parker, 2000; Strangleman, 1999; Terkel, 1985; Ybema, 1997). They recall their pioneering days or tell about the founder of the firm, former colleagues, the first products, the old

working methods, the shared dedication and the friendly atmosphere of former days, and more often than not do so in a strikingly positive way. The girls and young women who populated the halls of *Verkade* (Dutch biscuit makers) before Second World War seem not to remember the monotony of their former jobs, the long working days or the meager wages, but they cherish the memories of warm relationships and the fun and the jokes they shared (Hogema and Van de Padt, 2001).

Most of the time those stories about bygone days do not sketch a picture of some sort of continuity in time, but one of a contrast between past and present. They are mere illustrations of the differences and the contrasts between then and now, the old boss and the new one, before and after the removal, the reorganization, the merger, etc. Very different from, for instance, the stories about a personal conversion in which people contrast their present enlightened state with their dark past (see Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 179), we can deduce from all the quotes registered in those organizational inquiries, that the past usually compares favorably with the present. Modern management, products, buildings, atmosphere are almost without exception inferior to their "predecessors".

Gouldner (1954), for example, describes how miners praise their former boss (who was not very much appreciated at the time) sky-high and at the same time defect their new one. He calls this the "Rebecca myth", adapted from DuMaurier's novel about a young woman, who marries a widower and is then constantly haunted by the household's memories of his first wife, Rebecca, whose virtues are still highly praised. Mythology, as it is, has a clear preference for heroes and villains and clings to a sharply defined contrast between good and evil. Nostalgia works in the same way, setting off the past against the present. The past seems to be exactly that, which is missing now. The legendary or heroic picture of the past, the myth of a Golden Age, robs the present time of its shine. It is like a motion picture with brightly colored flashbacks of happier days and a bleak, rainy present in black-and-white.

A nostalgic reflection has little or nothing to do with an accurate historiography. It is a romantic reconstruction, edited in hindsight. Stories need to be plausible, coherent, interesting, emotionally appealing, and instrumental, rather than accurate (Weick, 1979 pp. 55-61). Anthropologists pointed out that folk stories about the past or even detailed descriptions of a shared origin of a group are continuously revised "to match the mood of present times" (Douglas, 1987, p. 69). Apparently, narratives of the past often lend a highly selective and often idealized rendering of the historical facts, describing the past from a present-day point of view (Cohen, 1985; Eriksen, 1993). The past is positively evaluated in retrospect, whereas it probably was experienced differently at that time. So, because of this subjective distortion we might advance that melancholic, romantic stories about former days rather inform us about the experience and preoccupations of the present, than they are relating the past.

Certainly, in a psychological sense nostalgic thoughts eventually tell us more about the present, because they do not primarily arise from earlier experiences. They are, as Gabriel (1993, p. 132) states, not a way of coming to terms with the past, like for example mourning, grief or repentance, but an attempt to come to terms with the present. Rather than ruminating over dramatic events or undigested traumas, nostalgia is cherishing one's memories of precious moments, heroic persons, historic events or minor but meaningful experiences. For a moment these recollections lift us out of the everyday rut and recall an atmosphere pleasantly different from the

day-to-day routine. Therefore, nostalgia is an expression of today's emotion about things that pass by, i.e. "the discontents of today" rather than "the contents of yesteryear" (Gabriel, 1993, p. 137).

Although the actors and the scenes of the action differ, by comparing several studies we may gather that nostalgia often produces the same type of stories with a recurring theme: being driven away from paradise, waking up from a dream world into a new, rather unpleasant reality (Gabriel, 1993; Gouldner, 1954; Parker, 2000; Ybema, 1997). It is as if, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the organizational life in former days is the continuation of the intimacy of the close family life of our youth and nostalgia ultimately gives away our hankering after the womb (Gabriel, 1993, p. 134; 1999, p. 22). A comparison of different studies shows that even the contents of nostalgic stories in organizations are very similar. The former geniality, dedication and loyalty have been replaced by calculated commitment and impersonal, businesslike relationships, like a closely-knit *Gemeinschaft* turning into a loose *Gesellschaft*. The simple joy of working for this company has been lost in the tangle of bureaucratic rules or the disorder of ongoing reorganizations. Smooth PR-talk must gloss over the fact that not the quality of products or services is the main objective any longer, but organizational efficiency, economic growth or commercial profit. As such, nostalgia is a romantic protest against the modern project of economic rationalization.

The psychology and politics of nostalgia

Undoubtedly, a warm and loving reconstruction of the past is a source of comfort and offers a treasure-trove of cheering thoughts. Nostalgia assures us that however dissatisfying, anxious or sad the present may be, we can always bask in the shine and glory of a golden age or feel comforted by memories of a lost paradise of simplicity, domesticity and solidarity. Put in an unpleasant way: although new times have caught up with us we can always reflect on good old times. Nobody can take away our past. In that way nostalgia is a psychological flight, an escape fantasy of dissatisfied people. In a similar line of reasoning Gabriel stresses the psychological aspects and impact of nostalgia, seeing it as a deep longing that is first and foremost a silent longing and finds satisfaction in the longing itself. For nostalgics their memories suffice – they wallow in the bittersweet thoughts about the things that were, because they simply enjoy it or take comfort from it.

However, not only for psychological but also for political reasons it is nice to dwell on the past. Nostalgia is attractive in both respects, because it is hidden from supervision and beyond the reach of rules and regulations. It is part of what Goffman (1963) calls the organizational "underlife" and Gabriel (2000) terms the "unmanaged organization", i.e. the non-organized part of organizational life in which people develop fantasies and spread stories, myths, rumors, jokes and gossip. According to Gabriel (1993, p. 138) the existence of such a dream world counteracts the dominant culture in many organizations that is geared to profit making, rationality, efficiency and control. In his view of the non-organized organization it stands for the exact opposite of this hard reality – it is not about benefits and self-interest, but about pleasures, desires, and anxieties – "emotion prevails over expedience". Although there is a certain ambivalence in his argument, it seems as if Gabriel does not want to mar the empathetic way in which he writes about the psychological dimensions of nostalgia by a more politically colored analysis.

We have to consider, however, that the underlife in organizations, apart from being an outlet for emotions, is often a hotbed for political activities. Gossip, for example, can be an instrument of the established to exclude newcomers (Elias and Scotson, 1965) or a weapon of the weak in their struggles against hegemonic powers (Scott, 1985 p. 282), and has been described as part of organizational politics (Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Kurland and Pelled, 2000). In the unmanaged organization, the collective "world of fantasy", people also dream about power, glory and wealth, or, on a more modest scale, about the preservation of the ideals they once started with in their work. Nostalgia fits into this political picture, because stories about former days are not objective or neutral in any sense. The political impact hides behind the fact that nostalgia not only takes us back to the atmosphere of bygone days, away from the present, so to speak, but, at the same time, indirectly criticizes that selfsame present through recalling the past.

If we mirror the time perspective, nostalgia can thus be seen as a retrospective on the present situation from an imagined point in the past. The dimensions of comparison are chosen in such a way that a dusted-off and polished-up past glorifies over the present. Dimensions on which the past would come out less favorably are neglected. This way, the romantic retouch of the past automatically pales the present – in constructing a sharp contrast the adorning of one pole goes with the tarnishing of the other. Nostalgia can thus be seen as directing the way in which we understand and assess reality, as an interpretation model *of* and an instruction model *for* reality, and thus as an attempt to influence the way of seeing and acting of organization members (Gabriel, 1993, p. 121). It is one of the ways in which organizational actors may invoke the past as a means of defining and framing the present-day courses of events for others (see Cohen, 1985; Eriksen, 1993; Taylor and Wetherall, 1999).

Warm stories about old times, cold reception of newcomers

The descriptive data from a study of relations between "new managers" and "old staff members" of the amusement park, the Efteling, may serve as a case in point, to illustrate the political reading of the nostalgic voice within an organization (for a more extensive description of data and methods, see Ybema, 1996, 1997). Long-time staff-members of the Efteling kept up a very animated underlife in which they informed each other of the latest news, jokes, anecdotes, rumors and gossip, not openly, but rather in the (for newcomers not easily accessible) back region (Goffman, 1959). In that way they closed ranks and excluded others. As a relative outsider interested in the underlife I heard numerous stories about the glorious past of the park, stories told with a touch of pride and melancholy, but also, as in due course I came to believe, a more or less conscious strategic ingenuity to oppose the commercial discourse of the younger generation of managers. In their stories about the company these "newcomers" emphasized the increased professionalism, the healthy financial position, or the record-number of visitors, this way claiming at least part of the responsibility for the success of the enterprise (the Efteling is the second largest amusement park in Europe).

As a counter-strategy the older employees, who used to hold central positions within the organization before the arrival of the new managers, turned the past into a fairy tale and emphasized the historical development of the park, culminating in the extraordinary high quality of the attractions and the growing number of visitors. By sharing heart-warming memories of the genial atmosphere and good relationships in those days they cunningly exposed the imperfections of the business-like way that

holds the organization today. Their pursuit of quality that made the enterprise grow, is in danger of becoming pushed into the background by the present commercialism advocated by the new board of directors, a management that makes them hanker for the founder's loving care for the park in bygone days and his warm interest in "his people". Rumors about the alleged fraud of one of the new managers in his past as a businessman reinforced the image of the new board as heartless money-grubbers.

So, it becomes clear that nostalgia can be interpreted as an indirect protest, a rhetorical instrument to bring to the attention of new managers and staff that late changes have not been for the better and that the experience built up in that glorious past has not been tapped. Of course, the vitality of the informal communication circuit in the Efteling was also due to the entertainment value of the gossip, legends, jokes and colorful descriptions of the past. At the same time however, it served as an outlet for the ventilation of bitterness about lost power and a means to oppose the new and relatively young members of the board, who, in turn, complained that they could not get a grip on the old retainers or gain admission to the informal organization. In spite of their positions in the official hierarchy they were often defeated by the obstinacy and closed ranks of the old guard, that kept its front with the help of gossip, backbiting and smooth talk about the past.

Just like close-knit therapy groups often start talking about their common history whenever a new patient joins the group, to make it clear to him or her that s/he is not yet part of the group (Yalom, 1988, 1980), fetching stories about former times in the Efteling explained the differences between "candidate-members for the club" (the new management) and "members of honor" who hold the important posts in the informal hierarchy on the basis of know-how, seniority and service record. Seemingly innocent stories can thus be interpreted as an emotional complaint against current policies, and, indirectly, as a strategic position-taking of the spokesman as an expert in an internal debate. Probably, a poetic narrative of the past is hoped to have more appeal than cool criticism of the present. People are entertained to either win them over and mobilize them, or surreptitiously teach them a lesson and subtly put them in place. By holding up an idyllic past as a model, a line is drawn between ideal and actual reality, experienced and inexperienced workers, the established and the outsiders.

The foregoing argument runs the risk of producing an overly politicized view of emotions. However, an appreciation of nostalgic talk as an inherently political activity is not to deny the quality of the unmanaged organization as a kind of emotional free zone, a playground where people let off steam, seek distraction, and engage in spontaneous activities that are not primarily driven by calculated self-interest. What is more, these activities may or may not be unsettling managerial control. They are often a form of distancing from, rather than persistently resisting change, and this "strategy" may amount to a rather benign rebellion (or an unwilling kind of conformity) that may not be strategic, i.e. politically effective, in every situation. Without reducing underlife activities to a control-resistance dialectic however, it seems safe to assume that there is a hidden political agenda in nostalgic narratives that adds to the joy of narrating them. Nostalgia seems to be part of the battle between modernism and resistance against modernism – it is then used as a subtle weapon in the struggle against a new regime and against the instrumental rationality, power and mores of modern, managerial times.

Managerial postalgia

The logical counterpart of a longing for a paradisaical past is a longing for a heavenly future. The antipodes of the representatives of the past dream about a Golden Age that is yet to come. History tells us that people like to be inspired by the promise of a good prospect and by prophets who willingly show them the way to Utopia. Eagerly, they look forward to this new world that is supposed to lie beneath the horizon and await the exclamation "Land in sight!" that will stir their hope and imagination. The longing for a bright future, in this article referred to as postalgia, can be seen as a discursive strategy of change agents and as a basic emotive trigger for change initiatives in organizations, in which one is under the spell of, for instance, pioneering research, new products, a modern technology, the latest trend in management, a revolutionary reorganization or the conquest of a new market.

Managerial thinking may be thought of as inherently postalgic. Even though managerial plans are often based on earlier experiences (Weick, 1979; Walsh and Ungson, 1991) and may be motivated and legitimized with references to the past, the future is seen as the ultimate point of reference for any managerial action (Mintzberg, 1989, pp. 27-28; 1994, p. 291). Although ethnographic accounts of managerial work suggest that day-to-day routine is typically short term-focussed (Koot and Sabelis, 2000), managerial thinking is clearly driven by a future-oriented desire to stay one step ahead of competitors, politicians and policy makers (Sabelis, 2002a, b).

Management sciences as well do not on the whole tend to be historically-minded and display a clear preference for forward-looking concepts, such as "mission", "vision", "planning", "goal-setting" and so on (Bate, 1997, p. 1155), particularly the approaches developed in the field of planned change (for example, strategic management and organizational development) (Noss, 2002). Handbooks on management theory can be read as an enumeration of ideal models that are presented as an answer to contemporary problems in organizations, asserting that a better future can be accomplished: Taylor's scientific management model in its time was thought to be the answer to irrationality and inefficiency; the notion of corporate culture came into vogue as a mobilizing ideal in a period of economic recession and entrepreneurial malaise; the concept of the learning organization is supposed to offer a remedy against bureaucratic ossification, and so on.

Before going into the role and use of postalgia in an organizational setting, a first understanding of the meaning and content of the construct can be developed by drawing a parallel with its mirror construct. A first common characteristic of nostalgia and postalgia is that both discourses draw temporal comparisons that delineate a discontinuity. In postalgical reflecting on the future, just as in a nostalgized past, a contradistinction is drawn between two points or periods in time, in this case between the future and the present or the past. Roughly, two versions of this future/present tension can be distinguished: the existing reality can be the negative reverse of a bright future or, the other way round, the relatively positive opposite of a dark prospect. It is, in other words, the expectation of imminent change, either dreaded or desired, with hope and desire projecting the future as the perfected antipode of an imperfect present, and anxiety or gloominess expecting decline or disaster.

Although both types of temporal contrast pertain to postalgia, the projection of a future that lies sparkling ahead is probably a more conspicuous characteristic. Just like a nostalgic glorifies the past, a postalgic has an idealized view of the future with the

present or past as its negative opposite. Whenever everyday reality somehow falls short and does not meet expectations today, there is always tomorrow as a reservoir of promises and possibilities. A longing outlook into the future, just as a nostalgic retrospection, is like indirectly looking back on today's world from another point in time. From this ideal viewpoint the defects of the current state of affairs are critically reassessed, rendering a present that is far from ideal. Picturing a future, just like reflecting on the past, sheds new light on the here and now, or rather puts it in the shade, as if we are living in the dark Middle Ages before the Enlightenment. Therefore, postalgia informs us about the desired future and, often more implicitly, about the disliked present.

However, postalgia is not just an optimistic belief in a better world to come. It is rather a *longing for* than a firm *expectation of* a bright future, a desire that is accompanied by anxious doubts whether this future will come true. Discontents with present-day conditions give rise to hope and anxiety that both may become projected onto the future and conceptualized in optimistic and pessimistic prospects. So, carrying further the comparison with nostalgia further, there is a darker, gloomy side, an underlying "algos" (distress), to postalgia, that is similar to the underlying melancholy of a nostalgic longing. Postalgia originates from the same source as nostalgia: an unsatisfactory present that pushes our imagination beyond temporal boundaries to think up an ideal world as an antidote against feelings of doom and foreboding.

The psychological significance of postalgia probably lies in the fostering of an idea of possible progress. Postalgia, or the myth it creates of a Promised Land, fuels the belief that the gap or temporal distance between desire and the object of desire can be bridged in due time. In that sense it is an *imagined* "real time" experience (see McKenna in Purser, 2002) that uplifts above today's troubles, a fantasy that encourages hope for the seven good years to come. Especially for those who have some meager years behind them and many years to go, the future must be a pleasant terrain to sojourn in, in a psychological sense and also, again, in a political sense. In a way postalgia, like nostalgia, can be an escape into a dream world that is far-off from power, control and politics in organizations. For daydreamers who are full of their own fantasies and for true optimists who think that everything will straighten itself out, postalgia may be just an emotional experience. Work organizations however, are usually inhabited by more restless characters that attempt to make their future dreams come true. Postalgia may then become a political activity as well. An analysis of the role and use of postalgia in the context of internally disputed organizational change will help to reveal postalgic discourse as a rhetorical strategy and bring out some clear differences between postalgia and nostalgia as well.

The appropriation of the present

Nostalgia and postalgia can be seen as part of a political fencing between supporters and opponents of the status quo within an organization, pointedly summarized by Bate (1997) as a struggle between "the elders" who "claim timeless validity for their way of life and struggle to maintain this by pursuing defensive, stability oriented strategies" and their opponents, "the champions of change, the young Turks, disrespectful of authority and indifferent about history, hell-bent on the pursuit of offensive strategies that will bring down the old regime" (in Parker, 2000, p. 199). Following this line of thought, narrating a romantic past can be interpreted as a discursive strategy to

oppose organizational neophilia, whereas prophesizing a fine future may well be an attempt to win consent for change.

In three different case studies Parker (2000) found the use of similar generational identities. Although all organization members felt they had the best interests of the organization at heart, they had divergent understandings about the organization's future that were intimately related to the value they placed on its past. The older groups that had been with the organization for some time often held positions of power, but were less likely to have formal qualifications (and were thus keen to stress that their years of experience were an asset that could not be gained through college or shorter tenure within the organization). The essential component of their identification was a certain nostalgia for a time when things were more certain and when there was a sense of community and a pride in a job well done. Current changes were distrusted, often indicated by measured criticism or lukewarm praise and occasionally by open hostility to the change agents. New people were in danger of sweeping tried and tested values and practices away.

Tactically opposed to this nostalgia was a new "generational identity" that tended to celebrate change. Younger, formally qualified, businesslike professionals were trying to introduce new practices or a new policy and reversed the praising rhetoric about the past. In a lenient mood they would pay lip service to historical attainments, to maintain just as well that yesterday's solutions would not work today and innovation was inevitable all the same, due to the supposed demands of a newly turbulent marketplace. Those who fearfully clung to past attainments imprisoned themselves in history. Quoting a young manager (Parker, 2000 p. 178): "If you don't gear up to change, you're going to get left behind".

The new, middle-aged managers and young professionals within the organization of the Efteling had a similar way of thinking. Selected from outside the organization (and outside the local region) they introduced a commercially oriented pragmatism within the company by advocating managerial values like cost-consciousness, return on investment and further growth in order to be able to compete with Euro Disney. This new-style management was aimed to turn the corporation into a more professionally led, financially healthy enterprise. In line with these economic-instrumental concerns they were not so much proud of the glorious past of the amusement park, as of the record-breaking number of visitors of coming years. For them the Efteling was not a fairy tale. It was leisure industry.

These and similar case studies by Laurila (1997), Strangleman (1999) and Ybema (2004) describe situations in which the champions of organizational change - the avant-garde, the onrushing youth, ambitious managers, consultants or politicians - have to compete against vested interests, entrenched habits and prevailing views, that is, against a world that bears the stamp of former generations. To counter the elders' appropriation of the past they plan a future that is stamped with their own ideas and ideals. The political question that is under negotiation remains the same: who is the "proprietor" of the present?

Enlightened vision versus romantic revolt

In addition to aforementioned similarities, the case analyses help to appreciate some fundamental differences between organizational nostalgia and managerial postalgia in emotive tone and cultural content. In these cases internal conflicts over organizational

change involve emotional eruptions from the organizational underlife colliding with the pragmatic idealism and economic rationality of the managerial upperlife. In opposition to formal change plans based on businesslike arguments introduced by new managers or professionals, older generations cast their ideas and ideals in colorful stories of the pioneering days, told with a touch of comedy and tragedy. Apparently, the emotional make-up of postalgia is quite different from the rather contemplative, romantic undertone of nostalgia.

Underlife and upperlife are worlds apart in many respects, one being a difference in temporal orientation. The essential difference between prospect and retrospect is implied in the cliché-image of the future as patches of fog in a crystal ball – we look into it expectantly, not knowing, waiting for a fortune-teller's interpretation. The future arouses curiosity, but, although one would think it to be the perfect haven for unbridled fantasy making, it does not stir our imagination as much as the past. Psychological experiments reveal a certain unwillingness or inability of the human mind when asked to look forward in time in contrast with the creativity that is unbottled when looking back. For example, when we are shown a picture of rolling oranges in a supermarket, we easily think up a cause – a woman who took an orange at the bottom of the pile – and insist later on we actually saw her doing that, whereas our mind does not claim to have seen the consequence – rolling oranges – when we only saw the cause – a woman taking that orange (Hannigan and Reinitz, 2001). Weick (1979) has described similar experiments demonstrating that people are likely to put in less variety, detail and emotion when asked to describe an imaginary event that is going to happen, than in their narration of an imaginary event that already took place.

Being future-oriented organizational change management has had to cope with the elusiveness of a future world and the deficiency of human imagination. It has aimed to do this by following either rational or normative strategies (Barley and Kunda, 1992). Normative control theories usually suggest that a good leader tries to inspire his followers and instill faith in a better future by emphasizing Utopian goals (e.g. Gabriel and Hirschhorn, 1999, pp. 139, 141). Inspirational rhetoric of change management is a matter of myth making that portrays the process of changing as a heroic adventure and the “change masters” as heroes. Depicting the future as an alluring prospect, a moral calling or a challenging ordeal lends enchantment to present-day plans and may instigate people to deliver a top performance. Postalgic dreams are used as a means of motivating and solidarizing the workers, as they seem to evoke a certain eagerness. A nostalgic memory of a golden age invites people to contemplative reflection, whereas a prospect for a golden future pushes people into willing action, for an enchanted past is something to be missed or cherished, while an inviting future still needs to be conquered.

Postalgia becomes even more different from nostalgia in the rhetoric of rational control that cultivates the thought of a future that can be organized, tamed, regulated, planned and controlled. While the promise of a mountain of gold should inspire to go uphill, a formalized change plan tries to describe the route to reach the summit. Organizational change agents often choose not to be fanciful storytellers or visionary leaders and rather resort to “facts and figures”, planning manuals, clear objectives, a formalized timetable and the like. It is the talk of the technocrats of planning and design that is dominant in many corporations. It lends legitimacy to change-policies by rationalizing the objectives and the process of change, that is, by introducing

forward-planning systems, detailed plans and so on, and by propagating a rationalized ideal of the organization as a reliable, efficient machine, a Utopian future that is marketed as a "common purpose" in order to grow commitment and obedience.

The emotional and cultural make-up of nostalgia and postalgia may thus be markedly different in at least three respects: managerial postalgia seems to be an activating force in organizing change (accelerating, energizing, expansive, form-giving), while nostalgia is a more slowed-down, reactive force (reconsidering, countervailing, taming, remedial); postalgic desires may be moulded in rational, purposive notions of planned change and corporate strategy (and may thus be analytical, formalized, de-emotionalized), whereas nostalgia is more likely to be expressed in boast and romance about "the good old days" (and be more emotive, narrative, contemplative); and, finally, the underlying feelings differ. Although the future may be as desirable and distressful as the past and both may become the object of a painful yearning, postalgia lacks the aching bitter-sweet quality of nostalgia. The dark and the bright side of unfulfilled (and maybe unfulfillable) dreams about the future are not bitter sorrow and sweet consolation, but apprehension and anticipation, pessimism and optimism, anxiety and hope. Apparently, the temporal orientation, i.e. looking forward or backward in time, may in itself generate or reinforce a cognitive bias or emotive inclination, with the past stimulating imaginative, detailed, romantic and dolorous descriptions and an unknown and uncertain future rather engendering progressivist, rationalized thinking and instrumental mastery.

Conclusion and discussion

The argument implied in this article is that time is a tacit resource "to be drawn on in a speaker's ongoing discursive work, in order, for example, to present an identity, establish a truth or defend an interest" (Taylor and Wetherall, 1999, p. 39). Past, present and future are imaginatively apprehended and reflectively (re)constructed in colorful stories, rational plans, critical comments, etc. Organizational actors may draw on temporal reference points in various ways and for different reasons. The analysis in this article focuses on the role of temporal talk that cultivates discontinuities by outlining the past or the future against the present. A desirous identification with a beautified past or future and a critical counter-identification with present-day developments put different periods or points in time in opposition to each other. The resulting contrasts between past and present and between future and present can be seen as an expression of either nostalgic or "postalgic" desires and anxieties.

The temporal home base of nostalgia and postalgia is, ultimately, the present. The future – as well as the past – serves as a projection screen of present-day concerns and desires (Adam *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, representations of the before and after are a reflection of, and indirect comment on, the present and thus inform us about the discontents of today, rather than about the contents of yesterday or tomorrow (see Cohen, 1985; Gabriel, 1993) – the past and the future are invoked to infuse the present with new value, meaning and direction. These temporal infusions constitute an "extended present" (see Nowotny, 1994), i.e. a future or past that is made present in recollection and anticipation (Koselleck, 1979) in which chosen solutions for present-day problems are understood and brought home to others through images of former or coming times.

The concepts of nostalgia and postalgia may help to appreciate emotional aspects of internal change politics by demonstrating how desires and anxieties may guide our talking and acting in relation to organizational change. In holding up the past as an example worthy of imitation, nostalgia can be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy to advocate a (re)continuation of former policies or practices. Future times, on the other hand, are annexed by organizational change agents in order to win consent for change by holding out a promising prospect (and a dark alternative if plans fail to materialize). The future-oriented excitement and anxiety that moves managers to conquer a new market, launch a new campaign, instigate change etc. may remind us of a lover-boy who is anxiously looking forward to meet his sweetheart. However, in order not to look like a lover-boy, the manager's heart is managed and his desire for a bright future is moulded in formalized, detailed, rationalized plans. The apparent rationality of teleological thinking in terms of strategies, planning, missions, forecasts etc., then becomes challenged by a counter-image of organizational change management as a converse nostalgic desire for and ambition to bring about a Utopian future. The irony of comparing managerial sense making with "telling stories of the good old days" brackets the seriousness of the managed organization, while drawing attention to the underlying psychology and politics.

By portraying postalgia as an emotive trigger and a rhetorical strategy of rationally planned change and nostalgia as the emotional response and subtle opposition to the selfsame change policies, the assumption is that these temporal frames are discursively deployed in situations of internal contestation over organizational change. An exploration of temporal talk in different organizational settings may help to further develop a contextualized understanding of temporal discourse. There are various organization studies adopting a similar perspective on temporal discourse that describe different and sometimes even opposite patterns in the organizational actors' constructions of past, present and future. A comparison between case studies may help to acknowledge the specificity of the patterns described in this paper and give some first directions for a situational understanding of the different ways in which the past, present and future are invoked by organizational actors.

Postalgia has been narrowly portrayed as a central characteristic of change-oriented management, just as nostalgia has been described as a weapon of the weak, as if nostalgic emotions or nostalgic politics are alien to powerful change agents and less-powerful organizational members may not be inspired by Utopian futures. If modern management is as change-oriented as it is prescribed to be, the postalgia-nostalgia dialectic could indeed be typical of temporal talk in organizations today. Yet, occasionally, we might come across managers adhering to long-lived traditions or clinging to vested interests (see, e.g. Jackall, 1988) and nostalgia may then serve to defend a strong orthodoxy and keep the ambitions of change-oriented newcomers at bay. Moreover, more reform-minded managers and policy makers may also deploy nostalgia as a proactive, change-directed discourse, rather than as a reactionary force, as Strangleman (1999) demonstrates in his case study of British Rail. In order to gain support from a rather reluctant work force the great era of the railways is embraced to provide a model for the future; a retro-strategy that, in addition to the "reflective nostalgia" discussed in this article, could be described as "restorative nostalgia" (rather than as "reflective nostalgia") (Boym, 2001) as it

postalgically proclaims an ambitious restoration. Apparently, history can serve management objectives as well (see Carson and Carson, 2003).

In nostalgic and postalgic discourse a violent contrast is created by setting up the past or the future against the present. Other studies have described discursive practices in which a more peaceful or appeasing temporal continuity is presented (Boden, 1997; Forray and Woodilla, 2002; Paalumäki, 2000). Whereas the temporal contrast model is adopted to instigate or oppose organizational change, a temporal continuity model serves to organize day-to-day work activities and to establish routine (Boden, 1997; Forray and Woodilla, 2002), or, in the case described by Paalumäki (2000), to celebrate the present performance of the organization as a continuation of a cherished tradition that is bound to bring a bright future (constructing an image of historical continuity even in the face of radical change). It appears that in these case studies the present is to be preserved, nourished and safeguarded, rather than moulded into an idealized past or future. So, while the construction of temporal *discontinuity* immanent in nostalgic and postalgic talk seems to be linked to the emotional and political turbulence of organizational transformations, temporal *continuity* is constructed to routinize (rather than change) organizational practices or to express contentment with (rather than criticize) present-day developments.

Apart from the patterns of temporal contrast (the nostalgia-postalgia antagonism) and temporal continuity, other patterns could also be considered. One could think of organizations where members have a joint aspiration for a better future or a shared longing for a golden past; that is, when either postalgia or nostalgia is the one salient emotion within an organization, or, more generally, when either "prospection" or retrospection is the dominant temporal orientation. A comparison between case studies of two newspapers' editorial staffs (Ybema, 2004) shows that the editors of both newspapers displayed a mixture of nostalgic and postalgic feelings, but the primary temporal orientation of the two editorial staffs went in an opposite direction. A detailed analysis should answer the question when organization members adopt a backward- or forward-looking orientation.

In order to seek a better understanding of processes of organizational change and continuation, the symbolic construction of a collective history or a common destiny through temporal discourse deserves scrutiny. Comparative analyses between studies that focus on temporal sense making could help answer questions such as: under what circumstances do organizational members experience or express historical continuity or discontinuity? In which situations do they find refuge in soothing memories of a glorious past? Or: when do they seek solace or inspiration in new expectations rather than old experiences?

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