

Theoretical and Methodological Principles for the Ethnography of Events

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This paper proposes theoretical and methodological principles for the ethnography of events. One of the greatest challenges for ethnography is the interpretation of culture dynamics. Building interpretative implications that include temporal dimensions of cultures as a core theoretical element requires novel “headwork” (VanMaanen 2011), aimed at specifying change mechanisms and give proper significance to the embeddedness of agency, within adequate assumptions of temporality. The paper presents a fresh approach to these longstanding issues. It addresses the ethnographic study of (organizational) events as the core element of a theoretical and methodological toolkit, aiming to connect in a novel way the three facets of ethnography: theory, fieldwork and writing. Groundwork within the sub branches of historical anthropology (Sahlins, 1981; 1985; 1992; 2004) and historical sociology (Sewell 2005; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010) inform this proposal.

In *Logics of History*, Sewell (2005) invites historians and social scientists to engage in a serious dialogue about temporality and social science, towards an eventful sociology. Although a historical ontology and methodology are not new stances within social sciences, the development of specialized branches along the 20th century involved consolidating distinct ontological and epistemological perspectives. “In particular, historians’ complex and many sided understanding of the temporalities of social life has scarcely found its way into social theoretical debate” (p. 1). Despite the fact that discipline borders have become porous in the last decades, Sewell argues this has not been a genuine dialogue, since historians use theory to orient their thinking, and not to “intervene actively in social-theoretical debates”(p. 5). Sewell (2005) argues for a historical social science as he discusses how social theory can benefit from a historical ontology, as well as how historians can deliver more than storytelling by drawing on the toolbox of social science concepts and theories. Despite the fact that historians’ thinking about time tends to be implicit, they do share a set of assumptions about how time is implicated in social organization and transformation far superior than temporal assumptions within most theorizing in social sciences. “It is precisely as theoreticians of temporality that historians can most usefully participate in social theoretical debate” (p. 6). Historians explain the unfold and causal impacts of events relating them to their contexts, working with chronology and historical contextualization, instead of submitting social life to general causal laws that are said explicitly or implicitly to be independent of time and place. With respect to historical temporality, historians assume that time is *fateful* and *irreversible*, that it is important to place actions in their sequences as to understand why things happened as they did, implying that outcomes of an action are *contingent* and *unpredictable*. Historians also believe historical temporality is *eventful*, *complex* and *heterogeneous*.

Ethnography has been defined as a strategy for data gathering and analysis (long-term field experience, a degree of participation, field notes, situated interpretation and data grounded theorizing), but not with a unified theoretical or epistemological perspective. Although ethnography has rendered a variety of core contributions to social and organization theory (Morrill, Fine, 1997), this research tradition has not yet adequately solved theoretical and methodological issues concerning the temporal dimension of events and processes studied, which has limited the opportunities for crafting social and organization theory in dynamic terms (Langley, 2008). This is because data are usually submitted to analytic procedures embracing a suspension of time. The temporal dimension of cultural phenomena is analytically abolished so that social flux is suppressed in the depiction of a continuous ethnographic

moment (Sewell, 1997). The resulting synchronic accounts of culture are historical accounts in the sense that they interpret a historically situated culture, depicting its internal logic. They differ from diachronic accounts of culture, which refer to history as temporality and transformation. Drawing on notions of organizational becoming (Tsoukas, Chia, 2002), the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984), and others, few organization researchers have written pieces of diachronic ethnography (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 1996; Feldman, 2004; Tsoukas, 2009). However, in these texts, methodological principles are not explicitly stated, but only embedded in the narrative, while theory is quite obscure concerning temporality.

The aim of this paper is to bridge the gap between Sewell's propositions of an eventful sociology and the practice of ethnography, suggesting events as a new building block to organization theory. It proposes a theoretical and methodological toolbox for addressing organizational phenomena diachronically, drawing on the study of events (Wagner-Pacifi, 2010). This paper illustrates its propositions with an ethnographic study in southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

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