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## Multi-Temporality and the Ghostly: How Communing with Times Past Informs Organizational Futures

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**ABSTRACT** Despite growing interest in time, history, and memory, we lack an understanding of the multi-temporal reality of organizations – how past, present, and future intersect to inform organizational life. In assuming that legacies are bequeathed from past to present, there has been little theorization on how this works practically. We propose that the lexicon of the ghostly can help. We contribute a theory of ghostly influence from past to future by offering a framework focusing on core moments of organizational existence: foundation, strategic change, and longevity commemoration, and illustrate this using a case study of consumer goods multinational Procter & Gamble (1930–2010). In showing that organizational ghosts, absent members whose presence is consequential to the actions of living members, are active and dialogical, we illuminate a dialectical interaction missing from other non-linear conceptions of temporality. This emphasizes the performative force of a dynamic past that provides an inference to action in the present and future.

**Keywords:** multi-temporality, organizational ghosts, rhetorical history, strategic change, temporality

### INTRODUCTION

The past matters for organizations. The rediscovery of the importance of the past in management research has emerged alongside a growing interest in matters of time, history, and memory. Diverging from a tradition of analysis focused on the effects of chronological time and path dependence, organization theorists have turned their attention to the social construction of the past and the temporal interplay between past,

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present, and future (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2020). They have explored how the past is remembered, forgotten, and used strategically in the present to build advantages for the future (Mena et al., 2016; Suddaby et al., 2020). In doing so, researchers have emphasized the separation between different temporal orders (past, present, and future) and the mechanisms managers use to harness past and future for present purposes. They have been less interested in analysing how those orders intersect and overlap. That is, we still lack an understanding of the multi-temporal reality of organizations – how the past, present, and future are integral to the lived experience of organizing. In what follows, we address this issue to explore how executives have managed the temporal tensions accompanying the evolution of a complex, long-lived multinational. Our research question is thus: How can the lexicon of the ghostly illuminate the management of multi-temporality (the co-existence of past, present, and future) in long-lived multinational organizations?

Much of the difficulty in studying multi-temporality concerns an inherited mindset that classifies time in three dimensions. We perceive the world from a privileged point in the present and define the past and future chronologically as everything that came before and will come afterwards. This geographical metaphor is so strongly attached to the language we use to talk about time that scholars have difficulty in detaching themselves from spatial notions of past and future such as short and long (Kim et al., 2019), and near and far (Schultz and Hernes, 2020). But if separating time into past, present, and future is not always the best approach, it is unclear how we should talk about it. For example, the past is often still present (e.g., the territorial dispossession experienced by indigenous peoples whose consequences continue to be felt), while the future can be so real that it oppresses the present (e.g., the fear of an unsustainable future through organizationally instigated environmental destruction). We argue that the language of the supernatural (spirits, ghosts, spectres, and hauntings) offers a conceptually valuable way out of these difficulties.

In traditional folklore, ghosts are liminal characters that inhabit two worlds simultaneously. As spectres of temporal transcendence, organizational ghosts bridge past and future. They manifest among the living but are trapped in the land of the dead. They are known because they are present, but their presence can only be recognized because of their absence. They insert themselves in the present but exist substantially only in the past. This paradoxical existence places ghosts in a strategic position to connect different worlds and eliminate temporal and spatial differences. Haunted objects, ceremonies, commemorations, and present-day leaders serve as conduits between past inheritances and desired futures. The ghostly, the perception of ‘the non-living present in the living present’ (Derrida, 1999, p. 254), is thus implicated in the construction of new futures, at the centre of which is ‘a contest over ... what’s to come next or later’ (Gordon, 2011, p. 3).

We define organizational ghosts as absent members whose continuing presence is consequential to the actions of living members. In this sense, they are absent presences. Organizational ghosts exist in two related senses. First, they are a metaphor to a remembered other (Cornelissen et al., 2011). Organizational ghosts can be understood in the sense that Gergen (2009) attributes to ‘social ghosts’, as a fictional (real or imaginary) other with whom we may engage in internal conversation. Second, alongside ‘internal’ conversations, ghosts manifest in conversations with ‘external’ others. In this second sense, ghosts exist to the extent that they are talked into being. In both cases, ghosts are

a product of rhetorical language that uses ventriloquial tropes to engage in dialectical conversation, whose objective is to ‘make or let a spirit speak’ (Derrida, 1994, p. 11). Imaginary, deceased, and absent others emerge in dialogic conversations with performative force to guide the actions and decisions of organizational members. Organizational ghosts may be conceived therefore as a specific form of rhetorical history (Suddaby et al., 2010; Zundel et al., 2016) that re-presents and re-infuses absent characters with life. In engendering the possibility of adaptation within an action field, moreover, haunting may be a source of competitive advantage.

People in traditional societies used to consult the deceased for advice through oracles, rituals, and ceremonies. Indigenous peoples recollect departed members as belonging to a ‘shared, yet dynamic, past’ which exerts enduring influence on the present (Bastien et al., 2021, p. 95). While Western conceptions of time dominate globally, indigenous societies conceive of time differently, not as linear and compartmentalized, but as circular and interrelated (Bastien et al., 2022). In Greek mythology, Homer (1967) describes in the *Odyssey* how Circe sent Odysseus to the underworld to contact the prophet Tiresias, who told him about his future and how to avoid the perils of his return voyage. In contrast, the lexicon of modernity precludes allusion to the supernatural. This leads us to believe in the divide between rational and magical modes of thinking, and in the superiority of the formal rationality embodied in Western organizations (Weber, 1978). Yet, ghosts seem to sit between what is rational and irrational. They represent an important component of modern living and their manifestation in organizations has been reported in several studies (Bell, 1997; MacAulay et al., 2010; Orr, 2014; Pors et al., 2019). Despite their apparent ubiquity in organizational settings, we lack an understanding of the influence of ghosts on organizational life and decision making.

In this paper we use the lexicon of the ghostly to propose a framework to study multi-temporality in organizations. Our framework encompasses three core moments of organizational life: foundation, strategic change, and longevity commemoration. We argue that there are three major ways in which to study the past that persists in the present. Following Derrida (1994), who suggests phantoms assume different forms, the spirit, ghost, and spectre, we differentiate between manifestations of the ghostly (Galois-Faurie et al., 2022). First, the taken-for-granted past is *the spirit* that animates an organization. This ethos is often built by founders and managers (Basque and Langley, 2018; Cailluet et al., 2018) and endures through the continuous beliefs of existing organizational members. For Derrida (1994, p. xix), the spirit represents “‘Experience’ of the past as to come’. The organization engages in practices of memorialization (e.g., through monuments and shrines) to avoid a rupture with the dead and infuse their spirit into the organization (Bell and Taylor, 2016). The spirit inhabits the underworld of the collective imaginary of an organization, and surfaces when disturbed by changes that threaten the organization’s foundations. The focus is on identity maintenance by *keeping the past*. Second, *the ghost* roams the corridors of the organization. It keeps alive lessons from the past and provides advice on how to tackle current challenges. It works as a supernatural aid that helps in situations of uncertainty, enhancing reflexivity about decisions that need to be made (e.g., through portraits, benches, or named buildings). Derrida (1994) defines the ghost as the metamorphosis and incorporation of the spirit. Ghosts appear to protect the boundaries

of right and wrong and when summoned provide insights into earthly issues. Their invocation is customary for situations of change in which lessons from the past must be revived and leaders are seeking a consistent path to the future (MacAulay et al., 2010). The focus is on taking stock while *changing the present*. Third, *the spectre* haunts the present, warning of the consequences for the future of current actions (e.g., the organization's sustainability). It keeps the present in check by emphasizing the ambiguity of current, future-directed actions (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022). Derrida (1994, p. 125) describes the spectre as 'what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects'. Spectres tend to have a recurrent presence in periodic activities of importance including the annual strategic planning round, but are especially important when organizations commemorate past efforts as a key to constructing the future. The focus is on strategic planning by *steering the future*.

We illustrate our framework with examples drawn from our historical case study of household goods multinational Procter & Gamble (P&G) from 1930 to 2010. P&G began as a soap and candlemaker in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1837. It is now one of the largest fast-moving consumer product companies globally with numerous billion-dollar brands, including Always, Pampers, Tide and Vicks (Dyer et al., 2004). In what follows, we draw on rich data from the P&G corporate archive and oral histories to consider how P&G executives have managed the temporal tensions accompanying the organization's evolution.

Our paper is structured as follows. We first draw on the literature on temporality, rhetorical history, and the spectral to explore the management of temporal tensions as a pervasive challenge for long-lived organizations. The next section is methodological, explaining our research process, historical sources, and data analysis. We then present our findings on the spectral at P&G in relation to three core moments of organizational life: foundation, strategic change, and longevity commemoration. Finally, we discuss our findings, consider the implications of our study for further theorization of the ghostly in multi-temporal organizing, and assess its limitations and potentialities for further research.

## TEMPORALITY AND THE SPECTRAL IN ORGANIZATIONS

### Intertemporal Tensions and Rhetorical History

Present-day organizations are increasingly pressurized into short-term decision-making, fuelled by the exigencies of shareholder activism. This concentrates attention on the present moment and the short-term impacts of corporate strategy for the immediate future, rendering long-term sustainability elusive (Kim et al., 2019). Shipp and Jansen (2021) argue that objective time is privileged over subjective time, despite being deeply enmeshed. This causes the significance of lived time to be misrecognized, downplaying tradition by linking the old with irrationality and the new with progress. The logic of the *longue durée*, the 'exceptional value of the long time span' (Braudel, 1980, p. 27), is overshadowed by short-term concerns. Nevertheless, long-lived firms are aware of the benefits that drawing on their history can provide,

recognizing it as a symbolic resource for the pursuit of sustained competitive advantage (Suddaby et al., 2010).

Drawing on Hobsbawm's (1983) concept of invented tradition, Suddaby et al. (2010) have advanced the construct of 'rhetorical history' to denote a valuable, rare, inimitable, and pliable resource to harness the power of a company's history in setting strategic agendas; producing a mode of discourse that can be used to re-create history for present purposes. This has generated a stream of research focusing on organizational history as amenable to manipulation by executives, emphasizing the role played by managers in re-crafting a company's historical narrative for the benefit of current stakeholders. Authors highlight the use of rhetorical history to support strategic decision-making (Sasaki et al., 2020), manage continuity and discontinuity (Suddaby et al., 2023), and strengthen organizational identity (Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Golant et al., 2015), by accentuating interpretive agency (Maclean et al., 2018).

Blending subjective and objective reality, organizational leaders can skilfully refashion the past to craft preferred narratives that secure buy-in from stakeholders (Cornelissen et al., 2011; Maclean et al., 2021). This may entail the purposeful retuning of historical narratives for sensemaking purposes (Maclean et al., 2014), or to address cases of ideological stigmatization (Smith et al., 2022), or organizational forgetting, whereby organizational rememberers are silenced to efface questionable incidents or personae from the historical narrative (Mena et al., 2016). Janssen (2013) shows how Volkswagen erased its history of forced labour during the Nazi era, until compelled to confront its unjust past by survivors. Intentional forgetting can provoke an 'ethic of remembering', whereby expunged pasts become harder to suppress over time (Coraiola and Derry, 2020, p. 233). Balancing adherence to embedded principles with the need to adapt to novel demands is therefore problematic. Keeping faith with longstanding trajectories whilst ensuring strategic relevance thus entails managing the persistency of the past in the present.

Relatedly, attention has turned to the enduring influence of company founders beyond their demise (Cailluet et al., 2018; Galois-Faurie et al., 2022; Sasaki et al., 2020). Coman and Casey (2021) investigate how museums may remain ontologically faithful to the discourse of their original founders. Basque and Langley (2018) explore how the founder of a Canadian financial services cooperative exercised a shadowy presence that lingered long after his decease. These authors propose various ways in which founders may be invoked in ongoing organizational discourse, such that 'ultimate authority is discursively assigned to the founder', as present leaders speak on the deceased's behalf through a process akin to ventriloquism (Basque and Langley, 2018, p. 1704; Mayfield, 2018).

The legacy of ancestry, however, is long-lasting and prone to command enduring respect. The distant past presents particular challenges for organizations seeking to change course. Recent research suggests that it may be less open to manipulation than commonly assumed (Popp and Fellman, 2020). Jones et al. (2022) explore how Barclays Bank tried unsuccessfully to invoke the Quaker values of its founders in seeking to transform following challenges to its legitimacy. A revered past 'cannot be easily ignored or revisited to accommodate strategic change' (Sasaki et al., 2020, p. 591), given the hallowed aura it exudes. This has implications for historical authenticity, particularly when the organization is deemed sacred by its members. The act of veneration can make organizational change more difficult, as the compelling visions of revered individuals may

acquire a life of their own (MacAulay et al., 2010). Cailluet et al. (2018) demonstrate how Abbé Pierre, founder of French charity Emmaus, was appropriated by the charity as a modern prophet, yet at times also purposefully distanced from it. Bell and Taylor (2016) illustrate how Apple tried unsuccessfully to encourage a 'letting go' following the death of Steve Jobs. Such studies show that founders may not always be wanted by the organizations they leave behind, and that they can sometimes refuse to stay silent (MacAulay et al., 2010). This implies that managers 'cannot always control these voices' (Cailluet et al., 2018, p. 1828). The past is thus not only something to be managed; it may also hinder as well as support managerial action in the present and future (Blagoev et al., 2018).

The growing interest in the uses of the past in organizing (Wadhvani et al., 2018) encompasses organizational memory studies, how remembering and forgetting inform, and are informed by, organizations and their processes (Coraiola et al., 2023). Organizations and those who work within them have a propensity to evoke memories of past founders, leaders, artefacts, strategies, successes and failures, and can draw on these at will via memory work. Memory connects past and present with the future, as do ghosts. It is therefore helpful at this juncture to clarify the salient differences between organizational memory and organizational ghosts.

Ghosts are not so much memories as illusions; but illusions that serve as 'interactional partners' whose 'powerful interventions' have real effects in the present (Gergen, 2009, p. 62). Ghosts make demands, provide advice, they can threaten, and are believed to be able to punish the people they haunt. What distinguishes ghosts from memory is thus their interactive character. Ghosts represent interactions that never happened, which do not comprise memories, but which are taking place in the present as individuals interface with both the past and the future. They are active and dialogical, communicating 'from beyond'. Unlike memories, ghosts are invoked instead of remembered, and may also appear unsolicited. They present not as something that occurred in the past but as an event unfolding in the present, in which characters from different temporal orders interact. As Bell (1997, p. 816) explains, the 'ghosts of place' are not reducible to memory:

'the ghosts of place should not be reduced to mere memories, collective or individual. To do so would be to overlook the spirited and live quality of their presence, and their stubborn rootedness in particular places. Moreover, the ghosts of place are not only ghosts of the past, they can as well be of the present, and even the future. However we locate them temporally, the ghosts of place are always *presences* and as such appear to us as spirits of temporal transcendence, of connection between past and future'.

It is this dialectical interactivity on the part of ghosts that distinguishes them from concepts such as path dependence or imprinting. In path dependence and imprinting, the past carries with it a 'certain consequentiality between past, present and future' (Petani and Mengis, 2016, p. 74), which can preclude or foreclose possibilities. Ghosts, conversely, bring with them a 'structural openness ... directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future', which can question policy decisions and courses of action, encouraging managers to pause and reflect (Davis, 2007, p. 379).

In assuming that legacies are bequeathed from the past to the present, however, there has been little theorization thus far about how precisely this process works practically (Greve and Rao, 2014; Haveman, 1993). Relatively few studies address multi-temporality, how the past, present, and future interact and inform one another in organizations, ‘travelling both forward and backward across time’ (Shipp and Jansen, 2021, p. 305). Extant literature has embraced a chronological view of time that implicitly leaves unquestioned the conventional divide between past, present, and future. The assumption is that the present is our temporal bubble to connect with temporalities that sit beyond its boundaries. The relationship between the past and the present is represented through geographical metaphors of near and far from the location in which we as observers are placed. Even scholars who assume a more subjective (Shipp and Jansen, 2021) and event oriented (Hernes, 2014) approach to time return to this metaphor and speak of mental travels back and forth. Yet the past also lives alongside us, presenting us with the puzzle of how we refer to these pasts that persist among us and contain our unfolding future, and how we accommodate these absent presences. In what follows, we propose that exploiting the analytical potential of organizational ghosts, as a theoretical construct, far from being fanciful, offers a valuable approach to understanding the role of multi-temporality in organizational decision-making.

### The Ghostly in Organization Studies

In modern, Western society, our sense of history is bound up with notions of progress, fostering an understanding of objective time. Western conceptions of progress rest on the belief that what comes after is necessarily superior to what has gone before. In recent decades, this has found expression in the inexorable rise of shareholder value ideology, encouraging firms to discount the past and future to privilege the present. In the late twentieth century, an orientation of ‘retain and reinvest’ on the part of large US corporations, which implied re-investing in workforces and communities, was replaced by one of ‘downsize and distribute’, cost-cutting and shedding labour in favour of distributing profits to shareholders (Lazonick and O’Sullivan, 2000). As Stout (2012, p. 10) observes, this presupposes that shareholders are ‘short-sighted, opportunistic, undiversified, and without a conscience’.

The recognition of a spectral dimension to organizing, however, questions the linearity of strategizing as other temporal orderings come into view (Pors, 2016). This challenges strategies of continuous accumulation, confronting them with a different kind of logic concerned with investing in workforces and communities and safeguarding future generations and their environments (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022). The ghostly disrupts the flow of time and causes different temporalities to intersect. Ghosts have the capacity to return, to conjure up what has been before, while heralding what is to come. The ghostly thus ‘testifies to a living past or a living future’ (Derrida, 1994, p. 123), implicating past and future in unexpected ways (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013). Organizational ambidexterity is likewise temporal (Reinecke and Ansari, 2015; Slawinski and Bansal, 2015). The lexicon of ghosts, we suggest, affords a temporal ambidexterity that offers potential insights into the reconciliation of intertemporal tensions in organizing (Wang et al., 2019).

Interest in organizational ghosts is rising (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Galois-Faurie et al., 2022; Knox et al., 2015; MacAulay et al., 2010; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016; Pors et al., 2019), influenced by the writings of philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994, 1999),



who rehabilitated ghosts as a topic of scholarly enquiry (Davis, 2007). Some commentators suggest we may be witnessing a 'ghostly turn' in organization studies (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022, p. 3). Much of it pertains to the shadow side of organizing (Aeon and Lamertz, 2021; Gabriel, 2012; Reedy and Learmonth, 2011). This turns the spotlight on the 'unmanaged' organization (Gabriel, 1995), where the irrational and affective spill over into everyday realities. Organizational life is thick with ghosts, former leaders or employees now departed, in ways which 'implicate organizational leaders as both haunters and haunted' (Orr, 2014, p. 1042). Contemporary actors celebrate past characters, chanting their feats and keeping their memory alive. Former characters leave their mark on places, depicted in portraits on the walls of corridors, or associated with named benches, offices, or shrines (Bell and Taylor, 2016). The act of remembering is thus space-specific (Bell, 1997), whereby remembered spaces become associated with seemingly authentic pasts that may signify 'a happy space of the past' (Petani and Mengis, 2016, p. 72).

Many ghost stories are founded on the notion of a ghost transmitting a transformative message to the living, implying intergenerational transmission. This is depicted in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843/1977), which introduces the idea of using ghosts to play with past, present and future in a context of liminality. For Gergen (2009), ghosts are revered remembered persons who encourage contemplation, act as guardians, and point to something requiring redress. The ghost is thus a social figure who appears when something needs to be done, signalling a glitch in the moral order. The apparition of Hamlet's father in Shakespeare's play of the same name is illustrative, materializing to alert Hamlet to a wrong (his father's murder) he must avenge. When the ghost appears, the regime is described as 'rotten' (I, 4, 90), having fallen into 'organizational miasma' (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1137), a condition of endemic pollution where time seems 'out of joint' (I, 5, 172). As these examples suggest, the apparition occupies a space where history and the irrational converge, whose exploration 'can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life' (Gordon, 2008, p. 8).

For Gordon (2011), the glitch in the moral order concerns present-day forms of loss and dispossession. Organizations have become active participants in the hollowing out of institutions (Perchard, 2013). The crisis of modernity is that we are not in control (Smith, 2006). Ghosts return to haunt spaces when the organization takes a wrong turn (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013), or when moral and ethical considerations material to the organization and its future have been overlooked (Coraiola and Derry, 2020). The spirit reappears to restore the moral order, and to demonstrate that what has been cast aside is still very present and demands respect. The otherness of the ghost disturbs the flow of events to surface 'the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present' (Gordon, 2011, p. 2). Illustrations of harm include downsizing, retrenchment, or other types of psychological violence inflicted by organizations on their members when the latter had 'failed to keep up with the times' (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1140). At such disjunctures, organizing becomes an issue of handling what is deemed disposable, having outlived its usefulness (Pors et al., 2019). Much of this is propelled by the rise of market logic, threatening communities in which organizations are embedded (Business Roundtable, 2019; Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022; Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2000; Stout, 2012). In such circumstances, decisions taken by executives may come back to haunt them later.

Haunting is therefore the resurfacing of a suppressed social violence, with implications for leadership action and the rethinking of ethics in organizations (Reedy and Learmonth, 2011).

Integrating the literatures on temporality, rhetorical history, and the spectral points to the ghostly as offering a new way of studying temporal interactions in organizing. In re-presenting absent characters and endowing them with an agentic role, organizational ghosts emerge as a particular form of and resource for rhetorical history (Aeon and Lamertz, 2021; Suddaby et al., 2010), through a dialogical relationship of ongoing interchange with present and future actors (Gergen, 2009). This emphasizes the nature of organizational ghosts as a potential strategic asset (Cailluet et al., 2018), not just as carriers of the historical narrative, but as having a role to play in ensuring the organization's sustainability. The ghostly provides an appropriate lexicon to describe the performative force of a living, dynamic past that perseveres in and influences the present and future. We next explain our methodology and analytical process before demonstrating the value of our analytical framework with reference to strategic decision-making at P&G.

## RESEARCH PROCESS

Our methodological stance is that of historical organization studies: organizational research that integrates theory development with historical analysis to enhance understanding of historical, current, and future-oriented social realities (Maclean et al., 2021, 2016, 2017). Central to this approach is the gathering of primary data from documents and oral histories (Harvey and Maclean, 2023), which together may elucidate the power-laden discursive and emotional processes underpinning strategic change (Popp and Fellman, 2020). Studying the ghostly in organizations lends itself to archival-based research, according to De Certeau (1988, p. 2):

‘The dear departed find a haven in the text *because* they can neither speak nor do harm anymore. The ghosts find access through *writing* on the condition that they remain *forever silent*’.

The written text becomes a ‘scriptural tomb’ (De Certeau, 1988, p. 2), accessible through archival study. The deceased are therefore silent and inactive, and can only be accessed through archival research. In contrast, we emphasize the dialogical presence and agentic role of the ghostly, such that written sources can be used to motivate and justify action in the present. Hence, the text is not a ‘tomb’ but a ‘womb’. Since ghosts are evanescent (albeit eternal) and come and go as they please, the value of archival research is that it helps us to capture those ghostly manifestations. Combining archive-based research with oral histories enables researchers to hear the voices of the ghosts in propria persona, allowing them ‘to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse’ (Portelli, 1981, p. 106).

We negotiated access to the P&G corporate archive with its chief archivist knowing this was a privilege rarely granted. The archive is located within P&G headquarters,

an impressive building located on Sixth Street, Cincinnati, where the business began in 1837. Its presence on the original site denotes an ‘authentic past’ while expressing credibility in the future (Petani and Mengis, 2016, p. 72); the ghosts of place helping to constitute ‘the specificity of historical sites’ (Bell, 1997, p. 813). Two team members were granted access to the archive over several weeks. Our intention was to consult documents pertaining to strategy, internationalization, and organizational change. We were conscious during our visit of the charged atmosphere that pervaded the building. We were given a pass to the building, and a room in which to work, with the archives team aiding in locating, copying and digitizing documents for subsequent analysis. Top executives, including then CEO, Alan Lafley, were visible in corridors and the restaurant, to which we had free access. The restaurant comprised a large hall with various food stations. On one occasion, after lunch, it was transformed into a town hall meeting, so we stayed to listen to proceedings. We were able to maintain distance, and avoid becoming haunted ourselves, by dint of the hard work entailed in assembling documents, which absorbed our time and energies.

This paper is founded on two main sets of original sources. First, selected document classes within P&G’s corporate archive. Annual reports and accounts, internal and external executive speeches, letters to shareholders, executive biographies, company magazines, and other materials were consulted. Extensive data were gathered from the end of the William Cooper Procter era (1907–30), the last member of the founding families to lead P&G, down to 2010. This timeframe was influenced by our decision to study internationalization, which accelerated during the twentieth century. The archive is also less complete for the earlier years. A collection of Cooper Procter’s letters was procured, affording insight into his character (Cooper Procter and Denison, 2007 [1957]). Second, we were provided with copies of extensive oral-history interviews conducted by the archivist with former executives in 1993–94. The interviewees had retired already and have since passed on, meaning their oral testimony is heard from ‘beyond the grave’. They knew several of P&G’s ‘organizational ghosts’ personally, rising through its ranks to assume executive positions. To supplement these, we conducted eight life-history interviews as opportunity arose with previous and current P&G executives in Britain and India, each lasting 90–120 minutes. The interviewees chose to remain anonymous. Knowing of no substantive historiography of P&G, we therefore drew on less independent, but still valuable, secondary sources, alongside the rich primary sources documented above.

The foundation of P&G in 1837 distinguishes it as a long-lived company. Temporality was built into our research design from the start. Our examination of the source material entailed a two-way interplay between induction and deduction, informed by our reading of the literatures on intertemporal tensions, rhetorical history, and the spectral, as explored in our literature review. As we cycled iteratively between the literature and source material, we were drawn increasingly to the ‘organizational ghosts’ in our data. First, they emerged from speeches, executives past and present often speaking of company principles they called a ‘spiritual inheritance’. Second, since executives often used the words of their predecessors verbatim, they became almost the ‘ventriloquist specters of their ancestors’ (Derrida, 1999, p. 262). The maintenance of an active archive afforded a rich repository of arguments from the past that could be drawn upon to provide solutions to present problems.

We took an early decision to compile a case study of P&G. The period from foundation to the late 1980s appeared relatively stable, despite walkouts, two world wars, fires, depressions, and far-reaching societal change (Dyer et al., 2004). P&G was well prepared for World War I, having purchased sufficient raw materials to see it through the first year of conflict when the US entered the war in 1917, and refusing to engage in profiteering (Cooper Procter and Denison, 2007 [1957]). As the Great Depression began in 1929, Cooper Procter records spending a weekend 'working upon a plan with some of the banks' (Cooper Procter and Denison, 2007 [1957], p. 178). In World War II, P&G was selected due to its 'good relations with its employees' (Schisgall, 1981, p. 149) to form a new defence subsidiary. Overall, P&G evolved incrementally by pursuing a diversified growth strategy, despite experiencing various issues, including over phosphates, tampons, and its entry into Japan (Dyer et al., 2004).

This period of incremental growth and stability ended abruptly in 1990, when an 'analytical breakpoint' occurred (Basque and Langley, 2018, p. 1693), accompanied by redundancies, plant closures, and a new single-minded focus on shareholder value (Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2000). Global restructuring strategies took centre stage. This saw P&G change from a domestically based company with international operations into a globally integrated multinational, producing and marketing branded household goods worldwide.

Chronology is comprised of periods (De Certeau, 1988), and structuring a historical narrative into sequential contiguous periods can uncover the generic logics that inform the flow of organizational existence (Langley, 1999). However, our assumption in undertaking this study was that conventional linear approaches to time were insufficient, so while establishing a timeline was initially helpful, it became clear to us that something else was going on. The real interest, we discerned, lay not in chronology or periodization, but in one temporal moment folding into another, and in the liminality between them. Ricoeur (1983, p. 177) writes that historical time 'is scattered into a multiplicity of times ... the short-time-span of the event, the moderately long time-span of conjunctures, the long time-span of civilizations, the very long time-span of the symbol systems'. These varying times of history (Braudel, 1980) overlap and intersect, underlining the importance of temporal interplay in human experience. Underlying this tale of progress and accumulation, different temporalities interwove with one another. We also began to uncover, surprisingly for a complex multinational, a spiritual dimension with quasi-mystical overtones. P&G's longstanding logo of the moon and stars, used from 1851 (Schisgall, 1981), is illustrative, erroneously associated with Satanism in the 1980s, which led to its withdrawal, being subsequently brought back in abstract form. This caused us to reflect that the ghostly, which connects different temporalities while disrupting them and inhabiting interstitial spaces in between, might be a useful conceptual tool to illuminate multi-temporality in organizing, the ability of organizations to manage the co-existence of past, present, and future.

Our thinking on the ghostly was informed by three core moments of organizational life: foundation, strategic change, and longevity commemoration. These three key moments in organizational existence informed our framework comprising three spectral foci and their attendant organizational practices. These entailed, first, the *spirit* engaged in *keeping the past* through memorializing and re-membering (Suddaby et al., 2016); second,

Table I. Multi-temporal communication

<i>Spectral focus</i>	<i>Temporal moment</i>	<i>Organizational practices</i>	<i>Multi-temporal communication</i>
<i>Spirit</i> : keeping the past	Foundation	Memorializing and re-membering to preserve organizational stability.	<i>Spirit</i> provides stability in collective imaginary of the organization, touching, motivating and inspiring present moments by instilling a spirit of belonging, and surfacing when threatened.
<i>Ghost</i> : changing the present	Strategic change	Ventriloquizing and re-orienting to manage organizational change.	<i>Ghost</i> keeps alive past lessons, providing advice to contemporary actors on current strategic challenges, inviting reflection to inform action and decision-making in present and future.
<i>Spectre</i> : steering the future	Longevity commemoration	Commemorating and planning to ensure sustainable future.	<i>Spectre</i> keeps present in check by emphasizing consequences of current future-directed actions, building a compelling, prospective vision of sustainable future for those who come later.

the *ghost* concerned with *changing the present* through ventriloquizing and re-orienting (Basque and Langley, 2018); and finally the *spectre* intent on *steering the future* through commemorating and projecting (Wang et al., 2019). We present our framework in Table I, encapsulating the multi-temporal communication informing core moments of organizational life through these differing practices.

Our initial framework thus emerged from our data in parallel with our reading of the literature. We set about coding our material, with two team members coding it individually, and differences debated to promote reliability. We searched for allusions to the ghostly alongside core moments of organizational life and related practices. Following Gioia et al. (2013), we distilled first-order quotations down to six representative second-order organizational practices, which generated three aggregate forms of multi-temporal communication. We mapped these to moments of organizational life and to different manifestations of the ghostly discerned in P&G documentation, as displayed in Table II.

## MULTI-TEMPORALITY AT P&G

### Foundation: Keeping the Past

P&G's origin story is one of surmounting misfortune. William Procter journeyed from London to the US in the 1830s after his business was destroyed by fire and looted. His

Table II. Data, categories and aggregate themes

<i>Illustrative 1<sup>st</sup> order quotations</i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> order themes</i>	<i>Aggregate themes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Cooper Procter described the greatest asset of the Company as ‘the spiritual inheritance’ from its founders ... Our character and values have endured. They have been passed down from the founders and enhanced by succeeding generations of P&amp;G employees’. (J.E. Pepper, P&amp;GCA, 1996b)</li> <li>• ‘Cooper Procter devoted most of his life to keeping that inheritance alive and healthy – to nurturing established policies and principles and to conceiving new ones’. (P&amp;GCA, 1976)</li> </ul>	Memorializing	<i>Spirit: Keeping the past</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘William Procter and James Gamble realized that the interests of the organization and of its employees were inseparable, and the partners saw to it that that belief was transmitted to their successors. It has always been people who counted at Procter &amp; Gamble and this is more true today than ever before’. (R.R. Deupree, P&amp;GCA, n.d.)</li> <li>• ‘It makes all kinds of sense for the Company to maintain a lifetime connection to its employees and to foster a spirit of belonging, that somehow never leaves you once you’ve worked for P&amp;G’. (E. L. Artzt, P&amp;GCA, 2006)</li> </ul>	Re-membering	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Following on the heels of these men gives me first and foremost a great feeling of humility. Next after that reaction comes a sense of gratitude for the fact that each of them remains here available to advise and guide me as I learn my new responsibilities ... With the continuing counsel of my predecessors, I will set out to learn this job’. (E. G. Harness, P&amp;GCA, 1981)</li> <li>• ‘Richard R. Deupree ... said, “If you take away our money, our buildings and our brands but leave us all our people, we can rebuild the whole thing in a decade”’. (J. E. Pepper, P&amp;GCA, 1994b)</li> </ul>	Ventriloquizing	<i>Ghost: Changing the present</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘This isn’t the last organization change. There are going to be others. We don’t welcome such changes for the sake of change. They are disruptive... But they are inevitable, and I am sure all of you understand that a strong organization can never be a static one’. (H. J. Morgens, P&amp;GCA, 1973)</li> <li>• ‘There were examples throughout our history where circumstances forced reductions in force. But they were rare ... [T]his has changed. People doing a fine job in a plant or in a sales unit sometimes have found their jobs being eliminated’. (Pepper, 2005)</li> </ul>	Re-orienting	

(Continues)



mirroring the first US flag, beside which a human form was added to evoke the ‘man in the moon’. The persistence of this story contributes to P&G’s apparent timelessness; allowing for multi-temporality in associating P&G with the foundational pioneering US of the 1830s. Ivory soap, produced since 1879, echoes this spirituality, named after a Bible passage William’s son, Harley, heard in church: ‘All thy garments smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces whereby they have made thee glad’. Its name was incorporated into Ivorydale, P&G’s first factory. P&G’s longstanding magazine bears the mystical title, *Moonbeams*.

The founders’ achievement is summarized by Pepper (2005, p. 303, citing Collins and Porras, 1994, p. 30) as legating a ‘spiritual inheritance’ which can never be obsolete:

‘William Procter’s and James Gamble’s most significant contribution was not hog fat soap, lamp oils, or candles, for these would eventually become obsolete; their primary contribution was something that can never become obsolete: a highly adaptable organization with a “spiritual inheritance” of deeply ingrained core values, transferred to generation after generation of P&G people’.

More importantly than the founders, it is William Cooper Procter (1862–1934), grandson of William Procter, who left an indelible legacy. Becoming manager in 1890, president in 1907, and chairman in 1930, Cooper Procter fostered a sense of identity among employees, such that ‘*he became the soul of the company*’ (Dyer et al., 2004, p. 45). Joining as an apprentice on the shop floor in 1883 amid worker unrest, he convinced the partners to give workers Saturday afternoons off, introduce a profit-sharing scheme, a sickness-disability scheme, an eight-hour day, and in 1932, a five-day week, persuaded of the ‘inseparability of interests’ between the firm and its employees (P&GCA, 1976).

The most significant reform instigated by Cooper Procter was the ‘Plan of Guaranteed Employment’ introduced in 1923, giving workers 48 weeks paid employment annually (P&GCA, 1948). P&G announced this ground-breaking plan as follows:

‘On August 1, 1923 ... for the first time in American industry the thousands of employees of one of the country’s largest corporations were assured of steady employment the year round; regardless of seasonal depression in business which occur in every industry’. (Schisgall, 1981, p. 98)

R. R. Deupree, who replaced Cooper Procter as president, explained the plan’s significance to the assembled workforce, at a time when Cooper Procter was ill:

‘Let me tell you how sorry Mr Procter was that he could not be present at this meeting ... The Guaranteed Employment Plan ... was a step forward in Industry greater than anything we know of the past twenty-five years’. (P&GCA, 1931)

Here, Deupree links the policy of guaranteed employment to Cooper Procter personally, and to the fellow-feeling he arouses among employees. Deupree considered the plan vital to good working relations:



‘Our Plan of Guaranteed Employment, which assures eligible employees at least forty-eight weeks’ work a year, has been in continuous operation since 1923. Other types of industries have come forward with other plans of stabilized employment, and these plans work’.  
(P&GCA, 1948)

This policy of guaranteed employment added to other reforms has secured Cooper Procter’s place as the most cherished of P&G forebears. Following his death, a monument constructed in his memory was financed by employees. It depicts Cooper Procter leading P&G workers into the future, and bears the inscription: ‘He lived a life of noble simplicity believing in God and the inherent worthiness of his fellow men’. An editorial published by the labour reform movement is effusive in its praise:

‘Instead of resting on the success of his ancestors he started working harder than any man in his position ever does ... Of a truth here is one man of whom it can be sure that the Great Master of us all will say: “Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of the Lord”’. (Cooper Procter and Denison, 2007 [1957], p. 196)

Tales of Cooper Procter’s achievements focus on the ‘spiritual inheritance’ he inherited from his predecessors and bequeathed to his successors (P&GCA, 1976), ‘passed down from the founders and enhanced by succeeding generations of P&G employees’ (P&GCA, 1996b). Guaranteed employment was pivotal to this. As vice-president Walter Lingle asserted in 1960: ‘We do have a way of working with people which I am sure is unusual in the business world, if not unique ... It is from this same philosophy that our policy of guaranteed employment ... has flowed’ (P&GCA, 1960). People were central to this philosophy, Howard Morgens (CEO 1957–74) confirmed: ‘The key to our past success has been people. And the key to our future – whatever it may hold – will be people’ (P&GCA, 1973).

The role played by successive CEOs – especially Deupree (1930–48), McElroy (1948–57), Morgens (1957–74), Harness (1974–81), Smale (1981–90), Artzt (1990–95) and Pepper (1995–99) – in transmitting the ‘spiritual inheritance’ to future generations of employees is repeatedly emphasized in P&G documentation. Deupree, who knew all former leaders (bar the founders) and his three successors, played a critical part in transmitting it, to which ‘doing the right thing’ was key (P&GCA, 1995). Owen Butler recalls his first impression of Deupree:

‘I will never forget R. R. Deupree standing up there and towering over the lectern as he did. He seemed to be ten feet tall, and he had bushy eyebrows and a long bony forefinger ... He said, gentlemen, this Company is now 110 years old and in the next 10 years we are going to build as much new business as we built in the first 110’.  
(P&GCA, 1994d)

Here, we see Deupree drawing on the past to inform the future. Butler’s depiction of him as ‘ten feet tall’ highlights the aura he cast. For vice-president Dean Fite, Morgens, as ‘the builder of the modern Procter & Gamble Corporation ... cast a large shadow’

(P&GCA, 1994c). Ed Harness (CEO 1974–81) summed up the sense of awe he felt to be among such leaders:

‘I joined the Company in 1940 – a time when the vast majority of the employees still had vivid memories of William Cooper Procter. Mr Deupree was the President. I doubt that any president of any company ever stood out as such a clear-cut example of leadership to the young people as did Mr Deupree’. (P&GCA, 1981)

The overall impression is of a succession of leaders who, through practices of memorializing and re-membling, are perpetuating a spiritual inheritance that motivates, inspires, and exudes a guiding influence on the collective imaginary of the organization.

### **Strategic Change: Changing the Present**

A core challenge in keeping the past alive is reconciling long-held traditions with new strategic imperatives. Interviewee E (2015) recalls that Lingle’s role was not just to articulate the company’s character (P&GCA, 1960), but to act as change agent:

‘I met Lingle too. I mean, he was pretty old ... He was a classic guy, he was very transforming, transforming in terms of the company culture. For many years ... the Procters and the Gambles were still key shareholders in the company. They were family people that were there and ... sometimes that’s a little restraining on a company like, “this is the way we’ve always done it, the way we should keep doing it”. And I think Lingle was always given credit for being one of the people that could bring the family along and say, “Look, it’s a different business now, and here’s how we’re going to transform it”’.

This excerpt identifies Lingle’s role as change agent, especially in convincing family members, residual presences on the board, that transformation was needed; David G. Gamble serving as the last family board member until 1970.

The altered conjuncture of the late 1980s, however, saw a change of direction at P&G. In 1990, as CEO Artzt took over, the company broke with its former stakeholder model to adopt under pressure from financial activists the neo-liberal doctrine of shareholder value. Artzt and successor CEOs – Pepper (1995–98), Jager (1999–2000), and Lafley (2000–9) – faced difficult decisions that challenged long-held traditions. As they grappled with new challenges, former leaders were there to offer counsel. Interviewee E (2015) explains:

‘People like John Smale and Ed Artzt always kept offices in the headquarter building, so even after they were no longer chairman, they were still there. They were there for consolation and advice and things like that’.

As this extract clarifies, past living leaders retained offices at P&G headquarters, still roaming the building after retirement. This appears to be longstanding practice. After

stepping down as president, Deupree continued as honorary chairman until his death. Morgens reportedly considered him a ‘father adviser’ even in retirement (P&GCA, 1994c). The capacity of the ghost to return thus has a more literal dimension at P&G, as former CEOs remained as lingering presences:

‘Ed Harness I knew. I mean I think he’s dead and gone. I was going to say would he know me today? John Smale, bless him, recently died. I remember as a young guy my hands would start to shake when I got into the room with Smale. I knew John Smale quite well and everyone since then including John Pepper’. (Interviewee E)

By the 1990s, it was apparent to executives that for P&G to remain competitive, some ‘discontinuity’ with the past was required (P&GCA, 1991). While Artzt stressed that ‘P&G’s greatest asset is, and always will be, our people’ (P&GCA, 1991), change was afoot. Deciding to shed 13,000 workers in 1994, Artzt acknowledged the turmoil this would create whilst assuring shareholders that costs would be minimized (P&GCA, 1994a). The decision was experienced as traumatic by displaced workers, who assumed their jobs were for life, and those administering lay-offs, euphemistically termed ‘separations’ (Dyer et al., 2004, p. 197). Interviewee C (2011), a global vice-president, sees this as P&G ‘taking [its] first steps in globalizing’. Changing direction did not, however, mean gainsaying the past:

‘The ability to turn is something that good leaders can do without necessarily challenging the past. The fundamental values can continue but your path can change if you see something wrong and you are willing to change ... P&G has that quality; it can move very fast when needed’. (Interviewee C, 2011)

Interestingly, Interviewee C sees the preceding direction as ‘wrong’, not the decision itself, despite having the power to ‘haunt’ later on. The strategic re-orientation initiated by Artzt and pursued by his successors enhanced P&G’s profitability. Yet the principle of being ‘people-oriented’ (P&GCA, 1976) appeared increasingly at odds with the new responsiveness to shareholder demands, and the emergence of a ‘ghost workforce’ of displaced employees (Orr, 2014). Many dismissals were US-based, as jobs were lost to outsourcing. This was politically difficult since guaranteed employment was associated with Cooper Procter. Pepper stressed the need to ‘operate differently’ *vis-à-vis* long-standing principles’ (P&GCA, 1996a). Interviewee A (2008) noted that ‘collegiality vanished’ overnight. Meanwhile, the perceived ‘need for faster growth’ to appease shareholders continued unabated (P&GCA, 1998).

By 1999, a succession crisis threatened as CEO Jager’s (1999–2000) attempts to introduce global business units were rejected by investors. The share price tumbled as rumours circled of an ill-advised merger with Warner-Lambert. Jager resigned, becoming an absence who left a lasting mark on the P&G historical record, rehabilitated after his death as an ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ (P&GCW, 2022). Interviewee E (2015) tells how one day he found himself leading a global unit:

‘Jager had changed the organization to focus more around global businesses. So suddenly ... everyone one day had a new job. So, it’s when I became a global president, and people in Cincinnati that were managing US businesses, suddenly were running them globally ... So, the whole organization changed one day’.

With Pepper brought back to calm troubled waters, cost-cutting imperatives including a ‘reduction in enrolment’ were prioritized (Pepper, 2005). The 2002 annual report records 16,600 ‘separation packages’ agreed with dismissed workers (P&GCA, 2002). This contravened the commitment to lifelong employment instilled by Cooper Procter:

‘Not too many years ago, a broadly held view in Procter & Gamble was that if you did a good job, you were virtually assured of a lifetime of employment ... [I]t becomes increasingly difficult for a company to achieve this community spirit’. (Pepper, 2005, p. 155)

Pepper returned to the mantra championed by Deupree, ‘try to do the right thing’ (P&GCA, 1973), which now implied exercising an ethic of care in handling dismissals. Contemplating such quandaries, Pepper defers to Cooper Procter:

‘I have a picture of William Cooper Procter in my office. I’ve looked at it often in recent years as I pondered a tough decision, and asked myself, what would *he* have done?’. (Pepper, 2005, p. 275)

Pepper’s invoking of Cooper Procter in this way – ‘what would *he* have done?’ – might be interpreted as window-dressing to attribute decisions already taken to an organizational ghost, or a legitimating attempt to show he is keeper of the flame, reinforcing his own agency. Both interpretations imply the use of ventriloquism, exhorting the dead to speak in imaginary conversations to guide actions and decisions in the present. Pepper recounts how he repeatedly hears Cooper Procter’s advice:

‘Again and again, we hear this finely balanced expression of Procter’s convictions on each individual’s accountability and the Company’s responsibility to serve. “The keynote to success must be fairness and justice on both sides”, Procter said’. (Pepper, 2005, p. 302)

This points to the nature of the ghost as *mediator*, embodying sage counsel, highlighting the moral dimensions of organizational action, and re-orienting the organization during a period of turbulence. It also evokes another haunting issue, namely that the family firm ethos had continued to permeate P&G despite its no longer being a family firm, rendering Pepper’s task more difficult. The significance for Pepper of conversing with Cooper Procter is underlined by the fact he uses this very image – Pepper contemplating Cooper Procter’s ghostly portrait – as the cover of his book, *What Really Matters* (2005).

## Longevity Commemoration: Steering the Future

P&G's principles were created by employees 'living them on the job' (P&GCA, 1994b). Embedded within these principles were nevertheless the seeds of future endeavours: 'Within our policies lie the seeds of growth. The reason for having policies is to insure the long-term growth of the company. Any time a policy does not help to do that, it should be amended' (P&GCA, 1960). As Interviewee C (2011) explains:

'With the past flowing into the present there was always a feeling of certainty, and therefore you can change direction because after all you are living today. If you change strategy you are not really undermining the past, you are just being contemporary, because if you have confidence in what you have been, you are not abandoning it, that's how it was; this is how it is now. This challenge of today happens to be different'.

Here, Interviewee C highlights the multi-temporality of 'the past flowing into the present' as the foundation for steering the future; building upon 'confidence in what you have been' alongside a recognition that today's challenge 'happens to be different'.

A strong awareness of temporality infuses P&G documentation. Successful P&G managers, Pepper stressed, 'treat time as a precious commodity' (P&GCA, 1980). Deupree argued it is how individuals spend their time that matters: 'The only thing an individual has in this life is time. Time is everything. You just have so many hours to spend' (P&GCA, 1937). An extract from P&G's magazine, *Moonbeam,s* to commemorate its first centenary depicts Janus, the Roman god of time and transitions, looking back to its foundation and ahead to its future. As the 1976 annual report clarifies:

'Procter & Gamble's history as a company of individual people is all of one piece – a strong fabric of enduring threads stretching back to that October day in 1837 when two immigrants to the United States started a tiny business ... Nearly 140 years later, the two have become the 52,000 individuals of The Procter & Gamble Company'.  
(P&GCA, 1976)

This consciousness of temporality is reflected in a desire to commemorate longevity. Lafley emphasizes this point when addressing P&G alumni:

'We are, all of us, here today because two men 150 years ago had a vision. And we are here because, through the years, generations of men and women have shared that vision ... The toil of thousands of people has brought us to this moment'.  
(P&GCA, 2005)

Here, Lafley articulates how the past imbues and is contained within the present moment. The company's longevity emerges as a powerful resource to exploit and to commemorate because it promises a long-term future. A new sustainability programme launched to mark its 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary is illustrative:

‘There is a lot of: how can we harness that to make people realize this company has been around a long time? That’s when we launched the sustainability programme, it was the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the company ... And it was a case of we want to be here for another 170 years. If we’re going to do that, we need to start working long term on sustainability’. (Interviewee B, 2011)

This extract shows longevity commemoration being associated directly with a sustainable future, which Pepper (2005, p. 303) attributes to ongoing intertemporal transmission:

‘As I think about how far we’ve come, I think about all we owe not only to those who came before us – but to those who will follow. For it is what we do now that will create the future for the generations that will follow us’. (P&GCA, 1996b)

In observing that P&G’s history is bound up with the present and informs its future, Pepper summons the spectre of those who have gone before and are present now to build a compelling prospective vision for those who come later. This signals the responsibility of current executives to ensure P&G’s spiritual inheritance endures. As Pepper explains, ‘We understand that we have joined ... an institution with a distinguished character and history that we are now responsible for perpetuating’ (P&GCA, 2005). While today differs from yesterday, and tomorrow will be different still, this ‘transformation has not come at the expense of our heritage’, Lafley asserts (P&GCA, 2005).

The above excerpts testify to a retrospective-prospective duality that features more prominently when P&G reaches key milestones in its history. This longevity is inextricably bound up with P&G’s mystical, ‘mythical quality’ (Pepper, 2005, p. 7). In addressing organizational members, Pepper cites Nobel prize-winner Andrei Sakharov, attributing a spectral, otherworldly aspect to P&G’s long journey to where it is now:

‘Other civilizations, perhaps more successful ones, may exist an infinite number of times on the preceding and following pages of the book of the universe. Yet we should not minimize our sacred endeavours in this world, where like faint glimmers in the dark, we’ve emerged for a moment from the nothingness of unconsciousness into material existence, we must ... create a life worthy of ourselves and of the goals we only dimly perceive’. (P&GCA, 1994b)

This reminder of P&G’s longevity alongside the anticipation of a lasting future – on the ‘preceding and following pages of the book of the universe’ – captures a sense of wonder by evoking ‘sacred endeavours’ described as ‘faint glimmers in the dark’, hinting at another existence beyond the material.

More light-heartedly, vice-president Tom Bower tells how he vowed to ‘haunt’ an Italian agent with his prophecy that P&G would make him rich:

‘I said, put it down in your diary, make a note, because when it happens, Joe, I’m going to haunt you with this comment. That was in 1962, and I haunted him in France last year [1993]. He’s made millions out of us, millions’. (P&GCA, 1994e)

Such extracts evoke a sense of magic beyond the purely rational. Artzt recounts that Morgens decided to invest in the Middle East due to an omen:

‘I asked Howard Morgens why he changed his mind about the Middle East ... He replied that he experienced an omen. An omen? Yes, he said that he had attended a retreat where he found himself around a campfire with Sheikh Zaki Yamani ... He remembered the Sheikh saying that they have a great economic future because all you have to do is put a stick in the sand and oil comes out. That got a laugh, but it also got Howard’s attention’. (E. L. Artzt, P&GCA, 2006)

This sense of longevity, and longevity commemoration, arouses emotional attachment in employees. Interviewee D (2014) describes the emotion P&G inspires, which he attributes to its long history, sustainable future, and feeling part of something meaningful:

‘I think that people ... if they are proud of the organization they work in, the company has an emotional bank balance with those individuals which allows them to engage with the individuals in discussion about the future, future of them as individuals, future of them as parts of teams, future of them as parts of the company, future of them as parts of the company in a sustainable environment within which the company operates. And I think the history has a contribution to play to that emotional bank balance through pride’.

Here, Interviewee D unpacks what P&G means for him personally, belonging to a company whose promising future rests on a proud past, eliciting allegiance in the present. As Pepper put it, ‘it changed my life’ (P&GCA, 1999).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Time is attracting increasing attention among organizational researchers (Kim et al., 2019; Shipp and Jansen, 2021), alongside growing interest in the past, history, and memory (Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Coraiola et al., 2023). A related body of work has begun to explore how deceased executives are invoked in the present (Basque and Langley, 2018; Bell and Taylor, 2016; Cailluet et al., 2018; Maclean et al., 2014; Sasaki et al., 2020). Despite this interest, time as a theoretical concept remains under-explored in organization studies, being rarely considered by historians or organization theorists, with relatively little known about the interplay between time and history in organizing (Schultz and Hernes, 2020). Much of the difficulty in studying multi-temporality is caused by our habit of categorizing time in three dimensions, erecting mental ‘prisons of the *longue durée*’ (Braudel, 1980, p. 31). Drawing on parallel

research on the uncanny (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Knox et al., 2015; MacAulay et al., 2010; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016), we argue that the language of the ghostly can help address these difficulties. As a product of rhetorical language that employs ventriloquial tropes to make the dead speak, ghosts represent a form of rhetorical history that re-infuses absent characters with life. This highlights their capacity for temporal interplay, emphasizing the intersections between different temporalities (Reinecke and Ansari, 2015).

Our guiding research question asks how the lexicon of organizational ghosts, absent members whose presence is implicated in the agency of current members, may illuminate the management of multi-temporality (the co-existence of past, present, and future) in long-lived organizations. As an iconic company whose origins stretch back to 1837, P&G provides an ideal setting to explore multi-temporality, exemplifying a timespan that is rare in contemporary organizations (Braudel, 1980). It is also a complex multinational where decisions are taken in real time, emphasizing the importance of the ongoing present (Kim et al., 2019). As discursive presences ‘haunting the discourse of their successors’ (Basque and Langley, 2018, p. 1686) and performing the past in the present (Zundel et al., 2016), the ghostly facilitates the integration of one timeframe with another, playing an active role in mediating between past, present, and future (Blagoev et al., 2018). It thus encourages an innate sensitivity towards temporality; patching over temporal divides dynamically and suturing the material and symbolic domains within which organizations operate.

We propose that there are three principal ways in which to study the persistence of the past in the present. The *spirit*, associated with keeping the past, discernible in practices of memorializing and re-membering, provides stability in the organization’s collective imaginary. The memorialization of Cooper Procter and his successors signifies P&G as a ‘consumer-believer community’ (Bell and Taylor, 2016, p. 116), with a cherished spiritual inheritance. This affords a spiritual reservoir on which managers can draw to amend existing policies and conceive new ones, with which they are consonant. Monuments provide sites of spiritual orientation that channel emotion and affect (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013). This collective imaginary recalls an idealized time in the past when employees were known by name, evoking a personal relationship that continues through the spirit.

The *ghost*, linked to changing the present, intuited in practices of ventriloquizing and re-orienting in managing organizational transition, offers counsel to current leaders facing difficult challenges. Changing an organization that members experience as sacred is problematic. Pepper’s communing with Cooper Procter highlights the use of ventriloquism at moments of strategic change, eliciting advice in an imaginary dialogue with a deceased predecessor to direct action in the present. Through ventriloquizing and imputed agency, the ghost becomes a guide and mentor, ‘there for consolation and advice’ (Interviewee E, 2015). The suppositional, *what would he have done?* asked of Cooper Procter as the ‘soul’ of P&G, is a route to reflection but also, in underlining present responsibilities, an invitation to action.

Finally, the *spectre*, instrumental in steering the future, evident in practices of commemorating and planning, highlights the ambiguity of current actions *vis-à-vis* a venerable past (Sasaki et al., 2020). Commemorative events, and the emotional responses they



elicit, evoke a distant past which builds confidence in the projection of a sustainable future. The spectre serves as a temporal reference point which stabilizes ‘future perceptions that inform strategic decision-making’ (Shipp and Jansen, 2021, p. 306). It emphasizes that responsibility lies with current executives to construct a sustainable future; all the more pressing since organizations have served as architects of environmental destruction, through which future generations must pay for the sins of the past.

Our analysis shows that the period from foundation to 1990 was relatively stable at P&G. The breakpoint of 1990 prompted a deep-rooted soul-searching. Questions of what it meant to *do the right thing* loomed large (Pepper, 2005), as the ghostly workforce of the redundant increased. This gave pause for thought while exposing current executives as not entirely in control (Smith, 2006), highlighting the role of the ghost in providing checks and balances on proposed actions by furnishing guidance and advice. Organizational miasma is characterized by a rise in euphemisms which disguise workplace realities but ‘defile the human spirit, by forcing on it a seemingly unanswerable logic of markets’ (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1142). The terms *reduction in enrolment* and *separation* fit this description. Yet downsizing may represent a ‘necessary purification ritual’, heralding a fresh start (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1147).

The emphasis thereafter was on steering the future to put P&G on a sustainable footing. The company’s long-run past promised a viable future as ‘experience of the past as to come’ (Derrida, 1994, p. xix). As P&G’s history extended, longevity commemoration became more frequent. The further back in the past executives remembered, the further into the future their planning horizons extended, on the basis that ‘we want to be here for another 170 years’ (Interviewee B, 2011).

The ghostly offers a means of handling the *longue durée* in a way which makes sense of the organization’s past, present, and future, and illuminates the interlinkages between them. The temporal flexibility afforded by the lexicon of ghosts as carriers of the past into the present and future provides insights into how intertemporal tensions may be reconciled, with implications for strategic planning. The ghostly illuminates the nuanced process by which intertemporal transmission occurs in organizations. It also highlights its capacity to flow in two temporal directions, retrospectively and prospectively. Strategic change becomes more manageable when organizational ghosts can be summoned to draw on the past to motivate, inspire, and re-orient the present, and project a viable future. In long-lived multinationals, where individual employees no longer know each other, organizational ghosts offer a means whereby members can get to know the organization in an immediate, personal way, navigating size and complexity across time and space (Petani and Mengis, 2016).

Our contribution in this paper is threefold. First, we develop emergent interest in ghosts in organizational settings (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Galois-Faurie et al., 2022; Pors, 2016) by contributing to organization studies and the uses of history literature a theory of ghostly influence from past to future. Management historians have rarely undertaken studies of organizational ghosts. In doing so here, we extend explorations of the ghostly to the domain of long-lived multinationals, which, given their size and reach, might be presumed to be resistant to such influences. Our research at P&G introduced us to a charged atmosphere we had not anticipated. Whereas extant research has focused on smaller sites in exploring the ghostly in organizing (Orr, 2014; Pors et al., 2019), where

the aura of an individual ghost might be assumed to be more pronounced, we show it is consequential to the agency of others even in a multinational, where a deceased leader can serve as the 'soul' of the company despite its complexity. In elucidating how the lexicon of the ghostly illuminates the management of multi-temporality in long-lived multinationals, the ghostly, we suggest, can play a vital mediating role, offering a uniquely valuable channel of communication.

Second, allied to this, our work extends a recent stream of research that examines how deceased executives are invoked in the present (Basque and Langley, 2018; Cailluet et al., 2018; Maclean et al., 2014; Sasaki et al., 2020), with the twist of drawing on discussions of the uncanny in organizing (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Knox et al., 2015; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016; Pors et al., 2019). Organizational research has been relatively silent in explaining practically how legacies are bequeathed intergenerationally from the past to the present and future (Greve and Rao, 2014; Haveman, 1993). Western organizations treat the death of their members with strategies of avoidance, sequestering death and separating existing members from something vital (Smith, 2006). While the spectral is not (yet) a mainstream topic in organizational research, we show how organizational ghosts can serve a vital purpose, a means by which members can interact with an organization's past, deliberate its present, and plan its future. The ghost provides a reminder to remember, encompassing an 'intergenerational dimension that consists in the transmission of the organizational past to future generations' (Coraiola and Derry, 2020, p. 246). This strengthens organizational identification in the present and future by channelling shared cultural memory (Suddaby et al., 2016). Haunting provokes a 'call to action', which may be too much for contemporary actors to resist. In this sense, it offers a source of competitive advantage; providing an important correcting influence on the organization's ongoing temporal journey.

Finally, anchoring our study in the most relevant and recent research stream on time and organizations (Kim et al., 2019; Shipp and Jansen, 2021; Wang et al., 2019), our main contribution is to propose that the ghostly perspective holds the potential for a better understanding of the use of time by organizations. The ghostly casts light on the multi-temporal reality of organizations by emphasizing the role of concurrent temporal interplay between retrospective, current, and prospective stages in organizational life, interlinked by a '*politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations' (Derrida, 1994, p. xviii). Whereas extant research on the ghostly has not assumed an overtly multi-temporal perspective, keeping the language of the ghostly alive aids the reconciliation of intertemporal tensions by illuminating how different temporalities interact.

What we illustrate here is thus not the demarcation of three times, but interwoven temporalities, the past in the presence of action in the present that informs the future. This emphasizes the multi-temporality of the moment, moments of the past wrapped within the present and future that reach 'beyond the immediate context, in historical moments, as well as in the present' (Gergen, 2009, p. 62). Far from being separate and distinct, it is the dialectical interaction between these moments that comes to the fore, as exemplified by the spirit of William Procter that lives on to touch myriad everyday moments (P&GCW, 2012), or the ghost of Cooper Procter exhorting Pepper to think hard about layoffs. P&G has since signed Business Roundtable's (2019) commitment to foster 'more inclusive prosperity' by creating value 'for all our stakeholders, whose

long-term interests are inseparable'. This draws notably on the inseparability of interests between organizations, their workforces, and communities. The propensity to act differently in the future begins with questioning past actions. Haunting highlights the present responsibilities of contemporary actors to take steps, as with indigenous peoples requiring remedy for intergenerational trauma (Bastien et al., 2022), or the ghosts of forced labourers demanding redress (Janssen, 2013). It is not that the past is in the past, nor is it a matter of memory; it is how it compels you to do something about it. While existing theoretical accounts of multi-temporality in organizations indicate that time is experienced subjectively (Shipp and Jansen, 2021) as an extendable duration (Kim et al., 2019), in combining temporality with the ghostly, we bring to light a dialectical, interactive aspect which is missing from other non-linear conceptions of temporality. In doing so, we focus instead on the performative force of a living, dynamic past that directly interacts with both present and future and provides an inference to pause, reflect, and ultimately to act.

Our research is limited by its reliance on a single case study, and we might reasonably enquire how representative this is. P&G is unusual on account of its long history and continuing interest in it. It still occupies its original site, where former leaders retain offices. This evokes a sense of the ghost of place, and distinguishes it as an 'extreme case' (Eisenhardt, 1989). Organizational ghosts are naturally specific to the organizations they haunt. At P&G, the ghost of Cooper Procter was willingly invoked, his haunting representing a source of competitive advantage, opening up the possibility of adaptation within a sphere of action. Elsewhere, ghosts may be less welcome, particularly when the past is not one you want to keep (Smith et al., 2022). In such circumstances, ghosts may be less amenable to moving on, affording channels of resistance to change (Cailluet et al., 2018). Many organizations have aspects of their past that cast a ghostly influence, but which they would prefer to conceal. Haunting decisions made in the past do not go away, they keep haunting the organization, leaving legacies of irresponsibility for the present and future (Coraiola and Derry, 2020). This suggests that even organizations that do not welcome their ghosts would do better to confront and address them, to exorcise past misdemeanours (Janssen, 2013).

Our paper has both practical and theoretical implications by pointing to a different form of relationship between presences and absences. We need to pay attention to what is absent and hidden from view (Decker, 2013), as well as what is present and visible. Our insight that absence matters may be valuable to organizations today. Organizations would benefit by learning from indigenous approaches to intergenerational transmission and the remembrance of departed members (Smith, 2006), to understand how they are experienced as presences and absences (Coraiola et al., 2023). By showing that organizational ghosts, as absent presences, can serve as a performative force to guide the actions and decisions of organizational members in the present and future, even in a large multinational, we hope that our study will inspire further research on the ghostly in different organizations, geographies, and cultures. Future research might explore why some leaders are forgotten while others continue to haunt their organizations. The site of P&G headquarters had a prior existence as the soap and candle-making business where James Gamble served his apprenticeship, indicative of the multi-temporal genealogy of the

ghost of place. Spatiality is often overlooked in management history, so future research might usefully expand on this.

Our study also has implications for how we understand family business, its expansion, and internationalization. Our framework of organizational ghosts has scope to encourage a wide range of applications in the study and practice of multi-generational family businesses, especially when they pass out of family domination but retain the family name, making it difficult for subsequent non-family CEOs to legitimate themselves. The story of P&G concerns the expansion of a family firm and the interaction across time between the family whose name the company bears and the professional managers who come to run it in more recent times. While conventionally these are deemed to be different stages in corporate development, we show that it is much more complex than that. Our case thus elucidates how the founding family of a firm can continue to haunt it after it becomes a managerial corporation, challenging notions that these are rationalizing enterprises.

As channels of emotion and moral action, organizational ghosts can move scholarly interest beyond the production of history in organizations, exemplified by rhetorical history, to the reception of history as lived. This turns the spotlight on the deeper, emotional foundations of organizations, revealing that ‘this secular world is not so irreligious as we might think’ (Goffman, 1967, p. 95). While organizational researchers often assume that organizations are rational systems, we show that they are not as rational as we like to believe. Our paper highlights the need for a re-enchantment of organizations in a rational society where our most arduous task is to find meaning in our lives. Studying the ghostly in organizations illuminates the spaces where the temporal and subjective interweave, with the potential to re-spiritualize our theorizing of organizational life.

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