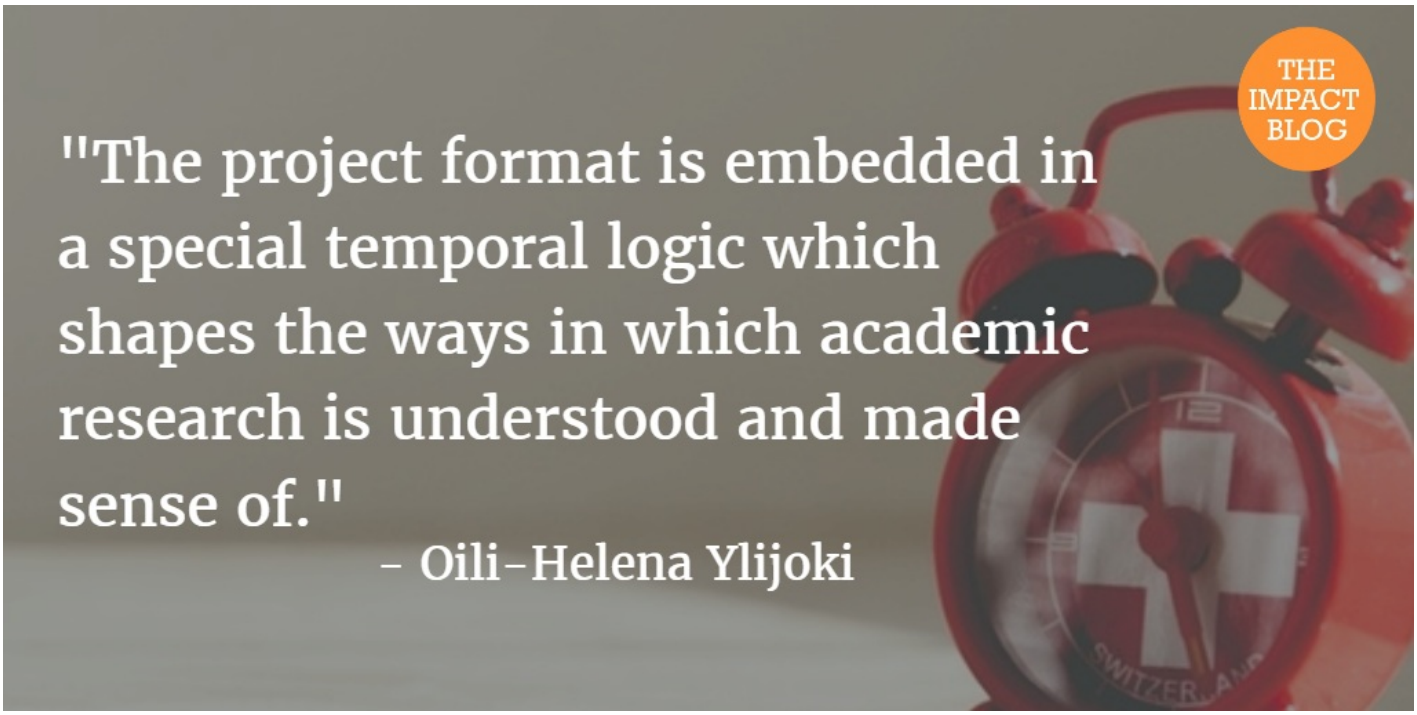
Organising logic: Project time versus process time in the accelerated academy.

There are two contrasting temporal logics in academia that shape the ways in which research is understood: project time and process time. **Oili-Helena Ylijoki** *explores the differences between the two. On one hand, there is the tightly scheduled, linear, decontextualized, predictable and compressed project time, and on the other, there is the unbounded, multi-directional, context-dependent, emergent and timeless process time. Due to the uneven distribution of power in academia, the dominance of project time sharpens the stratification of academic research and researchers.*

This piece is part of a series on the Accelerated Academy.

Accelerated academia lives and breathes in and by projects. Like in many other organizations, also in academia the project format has become the standard way to organize activities. The project format offers a temporal, fixed-term, fast and flexible mode for achieving specific, one-off goals, which fits together with the constantly changing and suddenly appearing needs of organizations (e.g. Grabher 2004; Hodgson 2004). This kind of projectification is obvious especially in the research function of higher education, EU projects providing a paradigmatic example of the trend. With the rise of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie 1997), university research is principally organized in fixed-term teams and consortia on external competitive funding from a diversity of national and international sources. The ideal of a lonely scholar dedicated for lifetime to one's research interests has been replaced by an effective, efficient and flexible team player always eager to become enthusiastic by new funding opportunities.

The project format is not only a neutral ant technical tool for organizing activities but has important implications for ideals and practices of research work. One core implication concerns temporality. The project format is embedded in a special temporal logic which shapes the ways in which academic research is understood and made sense of. I call this temporal logic with the term 'project time' and distinguish it from 'process time' (Ylijoki 2015). Both of these times are pure ideal types and formal constructions without direct empirical counterparts. Project time refers to the inherent temporality of the project format while process time refers to the internal temporality of research activity per se. They represent opposite temporal logics in several senses.



First, project time entails a strict timeframe, defined in the research contract. Every project starts and ends at given dates, and there are milestones in-between. Thus, the project has an internal clock that determines how long research can take, what stages there are and what results need to be gained by certain dates. In this way, project time has fixed, pre-set temporal boundaries, which separate not only different phases within a given project but also one project from another, making it an entity of its own with a logo, an acronym and web pages (Vermeulen 2010). Process time, instead, has no strict temporal limits. Its boundaries are unclear and blurred so that it is not easy to say when exactly research begins and when it ends; rather research is an on-going creative and reflective process as ideas keep on evolving and thoughts ripening irrespective of pre-set schedules.

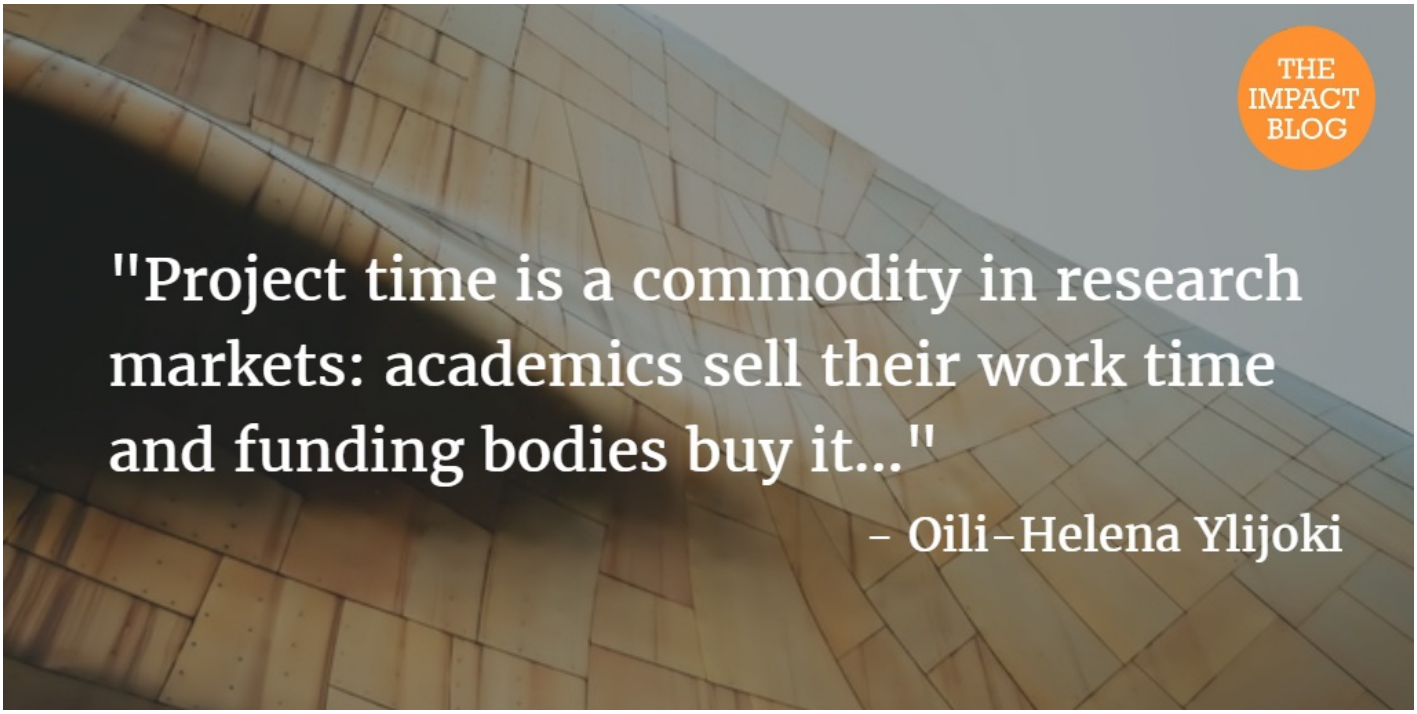
Second, project time is linear, cumulative and progressive. In project time, research proceeds towards the goal steadily. Each step is based on earlier findings, and often the steps need to be reported for assessment and control. Since the results are produced in a cumulative chain the temporal arrow always points forwards. Process time, in contrast, is non-linear. It tends to entail periods of standstill, deceleration and acceleration. There may be routine and repetitive phases when nothing much happens; there may be setbacks when it is necessary to go backwards; and there may be phases when research makes rapid progress. So, while project time is one-dimensional always heading forwards, process time moves in various directions on neither regular nor predictable basis.

Third, project time is invariant and independent of the context. It is based on dates, timings, durations and sequences which can be quantified, measured and evaluated by the clock and calendar without taking into account particular work conditions. Since all time is perceived as equal project time does not take into account what specific work is being done under what specific circumstances. In process time, on the contrary, the context matters. Process time is embedded in the particular work situation and therefore it allows variation when there are changes in the circumstances. Process time is not defined in quantifiable, abstract terms by the clock, but involves qualitative differences: time is experienced differently depending on the specific work context. For instance, one day means quite a different thing when the deadline is the next day than when it is in the next month.

Fourth, project time is predictable so that the end is known at the beginning. Already in the proposal it is necessary to articulate what the results will be and what scientific and societal impact they will have. This means that the future is included in the present and it can be anticipated and predicted on the basis of present knowledge, which in turn is grounded in past results. Project time is thus rooted in mechanistic causality. This is reverse in process time. It is unpredictable: the future remains open and potential, involving a space for emergence, something totally new and

unexpected to appear. From the angle of process time, it would be totally irrational to define the results before the research is actually conducted.

Lastly, project time is rooted in fast time. Research projects are organized according to tight timetables since the aim is to achieve the goals in the most cost-efficient ways. Also, because the competition for funding is hard, there is a tendency to promise to do a lot in the applications, which fosters fast time, speeding up of activity and time pressure. Fast time is linked also with constant awareness of the time available by the end of each phase of the project. Process time, by contrast, entails timeless time, in which academics are able to immerse in work and transcendent constant time awareness. The tempo and rhythm of work is not defined by the schedule but by the task at hand: it takes as much time that is needed. This kind of immersion in timeless time entails enjoyable and rewarding flow experiences, but there may be also moments of distress and anxiety when the work gets trapped. In any case, timeless time is not necessarily slow time (Vostal 2014) but it may include heated and hectic moments of discovery and inspiration. The crucial thing is whether hectic working is externally or internally imposed.



All in all, the tightly scheduled, linear, decontextualized, predictable and compressed project time and the unbounded, multi-directional, context-dependent, emergent and timeless process time embody opposite temporal logics. The key challenge is that as a consequence of the intensified grip of academic capitalism and the increasingly hard competition for research funding, there seems to be less and less space for process time. Project time is a commodity in research markets: academics sell their work time and funding bodies buy it, and this transaction is made with the help of project time.

In actual research practices, these two ideal typical temporalities get intermingled and overlapped. Academics as active agents navigate within the project format and negotiate its temporal terms and conditions from their own perspectives and interests. However, the bargaining power is not evenly distributed. At the other end of the continuum there are star scientists with luxury projects allowing abundantly process time; at the opposite end there is a mass of short-term project researchers working under tightly scheduled and uncertain circumstances. In this sense, the increasing dominance of project time over process time sharpens the stratification of academic research and researchers.

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Review.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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