

How does organizational improvisation drive sustained change? A Longitudinal Case Study

Pan Qiong^{a,*}, Du Yifei^b

Professor of College of Economics and Management, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Sichuan, China

^ajune0148@163.com, ^bduyf@uestc.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Keywords: Continuous Change, Organizational improvisation, experience, internal activity

Abstract. A Growing body of scholars emphasizes the importance of extending knowledge of organizational change by explaining why and how continuous change occurs. Combined with organizational improvisation, we explain how continuous change occurs through a longitudinal case study. Organizational improvisation plays an important role in accepting environmental changes, especially sudden changes, but in the long run, the realization of continuous change requires two wings to be waved simultaneously: (1)In response to environmental changes, part of the organizational improvisation process is retained, forming experience, and promoting the next organizational improvisation; (2)In response to environmental changes, Organizational improvisation lead to internal activity, which is conducive to the next organization improvisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tianfu TV is a model new-media platform enterprise around China, which located in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. However it was a traditional audio-visual publishing house on the brink of bankruptcy eight years ago. The Chengdu audio visual publishing house was founded in 1989 and is part of the Chengdu radio and TV Bureau, and it was the best performing organization in Sichuan's peers relying on the introduction of copyrighted tapes. However, the entertainment content market began to the Red Sea in the middle of 90 years, and the audio and video industry encountered a collective decline. Their main business collapsed and the operation almost stagnated. Chengdu Audiovisual Publishing House began to seek new ways to survive. By trying, they first found a pattern of media advertising + merchandise sales, and achieve a large success. However, the prospect of this development way is valued by the upper unit, who directly grabbed its market. After that, the audio-visual society succeeded in breaking through the cultural market in the marginal areas. but the relevant policies of the government have limited the investment in cultural activities, and the new mode can no longer go on. The frequently frustrated organizations did not give up their advance, continued to explore and discover their own advantages as a government-media in the new media era, and have access to Qualification Examination Authority, and became the first "Internet content integration distribution platform for digital audio and video publishing house" around China ---Tianfu TV.

As our observation, the transformation process of Tianfu TV seems out of plan. It often does not have clear goals and steps, and always suffers unexpected constraints and restrictions. Moreover, the organization has embarked on the road of exploration and finally achieved a successful transformation through encountering unexpected change. So how did this happen?

Researchers have depicted organizational change as either planned or emergent^[1]. From emergent

approach, organizational change is the result of interaction between change choice and changing environment^[2]. Therefore organizations need to face more things, not only internal resistance.^[3] This suggests that it is crucial for firms to interact with changing environments virtuously. Because of continuous interaction with environment, change from emergent approach is usually continuous change. Despite the theoretical and practical importance of continuous organizational change^{[4][5]}, a central research question remains unsolved: Why and how do continuous change happen?

Combined with organizational improvisation, this study explains how continuous change occurs through a longitudinal case study. We reveals the transformation process of organization from emergent approach, thus make new exploration from this perspective. And we explain how organizations can improvise continuously in order to cope with changing circumstances.

2. RELATED LITERETURE

2.1 Organizational change and transformation

Lewin applies the field theory to organizational change and transformation, and defines the change as a continuous process of “unfreeze - change - refreeze”^[6]. After that, Kotter^[7], Isabella^[8] and Armenakis, et al^[9] continue to describe and improve the multistage model. In their view, the organization is a relatively static and controllable object, and the successful organizational change and transformation often require clear target and overall co-ordination^{[10][11]}.

With the development of the field of organizational change, some scholars have begun to reflect on the study of organizational change. Organizational change is not the linear, planned process of change selection, but also influenced by the external environment, the situation and many other factors^[12]. Weick & Quinn points out that the Lewin model is based on an inertial, linear, target setting hypothesis, and changes need to be driven by disequilibrium and completed under external intervention^[13]. However, change should be a natural process of persisting. Recent years, some studies have begun to discover that some unintentional attempts or actions can also lead to organizational change^[14-16].

Research on organizational change and transformation mainly based on a static perspective rather than the dynamic, change, and formation view. Although some scholars began to call on transiting research perspective from static and objective to dynamic, open and continuous at the end of the last century^[17-20].

2.2 organization improvisation

Uncertainty, ambiguity and rapidly changing have become the main characteristics of the business environment. There seems to be a strong case for fundamental change in the current forms of organizing^[21]. However, realized organizational strategies and actions do not solely depend on the organization's deliberate options and explicit or even implicit intentions^[22], but also depend on ability to respond to sudden changes timely. The effectiveness of existing organizational theories characterized by order and control is also challenged^[20]. As a result, more and more researchers have begun to construct new organizational theories that can explain and guide “unplanned” or “sudden” organizational behavior, and believe that improvisation will be an effective means to cope with complex environment^[23].

Based on previous studies, Wang et al defines organizational improvisation as an quickly

organization respond, cooperating with relevant subjects, integrating and utilizing existing resources, and creatively solving threats or grasping fleeting opportunities in the face of unexpected external environment^[24]. Many research focus on the issues of improvisation and learning^{[23][24]}, organizational memory, innovation^{[25][26]} and strategic change^[27]. The relationship between them has been confirmed, but the specific mechanism and process need to be further studied.

3. METHOD

This paper aims to explore how organizations catch changes, and achieve transformation. Longitudinal case study is suited for this kind of question^[28]. We chose a media company--Tianfu TV (formerly Chengdu audio-visual publishing house), which made a successful transformation as an analysis case.

3.1 Data Sources

Interview We have completed three stages of field research and interview since 2016, including a 3-week observation of the company. A total of 11 interviews were conducted, involving 19 participants, including 9 senior executives, 8 middle-level managers and 2 staff, which Table 1 presents.

Table1 detail on interview

Order	Time	Interviewee	Position	Primary Coverage
1	2016.5.6	Wang * Ceng *	senior	Organizational development status quo
2	2017.6.15	Wang*, Shi*, Xiao*, Cheng*, Zhang*	senior	Details of key events transformation: background, manager reaction, event process and result, etc.
3	2017.7.3	Zhou*, Jiang*, Tan*, Gao*	middle	
4	2017.7.25	Liu*	middle	
5	2017.7.30	He*	senior	Some problems and difficulties encountered in the process of transformation
6	2017.8.11	Wang*, Zhao*, Wang *	senior	Industry development judgment and new business layout
7	2017.11.09	Wang *	middle	Employee composition and basic work state in the organization
8	2017.11.14	Zhao*	staff	Business information of the employee's Department
9	2017.11.16	Xie*		
10	2017.11.20	Wang *	middle	The company's new organizational structure and responsibilities, as well as the restriction of Chengdu TV station.
11	2017.11.24	Hu * Xie *	middle	

Secondary sources and other data. We reviewed 64 articles on WeChat public address about

the company. We also reviewed internal documents, reports, Web site, the Web sites of other local providers of media and other materials as available. 70 studies related to enterprise transformation. Finally, one of the authors conducted a three-week enterprise observation, directly participated in the relevant meetings and activities of the enterprise, and talked with employees, and kept a daily observation diary.

3.2 Data Analysis

We sought to tell a story based on the analysis of themes^[29], a story about how can organizations catch sustained changes, and achieve development and transformation. We constructed a timeline based on informants' recollections of important events, newspaper articles, and documents, which Table 2 presents.

Table2 Key events of Organizational Change

period	Condition/Event/Action
1989	The Chengdu audio visual publishing house was established.
1989-1995	fitted China's audio-visual content Market ,brilliant development
1996-2006	The market shrunk and business stagnated.
2006-2010	Reform of enterprise system, business stagnated.
2011	Try new business models
2012	The new business model is effective, ensuring the survival of the enterprise
2012	Last business model is copied by the upper unit, try second models again.
2013	National policy limits the continued development of the second models.
2013	Building new Tianfu TV mode
2015	Platform mode has been recognized
2016	Built the "Internet media Ecosystem under the leadership of the Party".
2017	Expand market and get new development

Based on the key events, we comb out the three major changes in the process of organization transformation. Each major change is then described in detail, including the background, the organization's reaction process, and the outcome. In repeated discussions and theoretical links, label the corresponding phenomena and form the key constructs. Then we compare each major change to find out the characteristics of longitudinal change. We present the specific analysis process combined with research findings in following section.

4. FINDINGS

Through the analysis of process, it is found that the organization has experienced three major changes from near bankruptcy to successful transition.

4.1 Improvisation as organizational responses

Through the analysis of every major change in the organization, some Keywords begin to emerge, such as unclear goals, rapid attempts, resource integration, etc. Combined with the background of change, we associate such organizational reactions with organizational improvisation. Wang et al point out that organizational improvisation should include three dimensions: immediate response, intentional creation, and resource integration^[24]. Improvisation is particularly important

when the organization undertakes the environmental change, especially the sudden change ^[23]. The following will be a detailed analysis of the organizational responses and outcomes of three period.

4.2 From bankruptcy to survival(2010-2013)

Chengdu Audio and Video Publishing House have basically no business after being transformed from an industrial unit into an enterprise, with nearly 4 million liabilities. The entire publishing house has only three members. Beginning in 2010, the new chairman decided to lead the company to transition. However, in early 2011, the audio-visual publishing house did not receive sufficient financial support from its superior unit--Chengdu TV Station. It's very difficult for us that the higher authorities allocate 3 million dollars from us to run the business. (Wang, I2) After that, it tried to make regular media operations, such as operating a column or a channel, but in the end they failed. Faced with the condition that without enough money, without business, then what should we do? (Wang, I2) the organization does not have a clear goal. But soon, the audio-visual publishing house turned its attention to the station's "junk time" –the time from 10:30 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Through analysis, it is found that unexpected condition making enterprises dig up and use some hidden resources, or idle resources that are not valued before.

However, the specific business models are still being explored. The publishing house carries out product brand packaging and promotion for a small food enterprise, and puts the promotion advertisement on television. When these ads were broadcast on the TV station at that time, I felt I was right. Because most of the audiences in this period are elderly people at home, they go shopping after they have seen advertisements (Wang, I2). At this time, the general manager integrated the commercial supermarket channel at hand, and began to put the products advertised in the major supermarkets, and achieved good results. After the success of this attempt, the enterprise quickly copied the model, achieved 17 million of its revenue in second years, supporting the survival of enterprises. After three years of efforts, the company has returned more than 2 million yuan in debt. This is the first business model after our restructuring, the combination of media and commodities (Wang, I2). In continuing exploration, new resources are integrated to create new business models.

4.3 From survival to development(2014-2015)

When the organization continue to expand the market on the "advertising model", the superior enterprises establish an industry department specializing in this operation. "They have more resources than we have, which directly cut our way" (Wang, I2) Audio-visual agencies assessed the situation at the time, that it is difficult to obtain living space and competitive advantage in the large urban areas of Chengdu, "Upon receipt of the news (Chengdu TV will be like the establishment of an industry ministry to operate a combination of media and commodities), we went to prefectures, went to small places" (Wang, I2).

In 2013, the cultural publicity business model of prefectures and prefectures was restricted by the new national policy. The audio-visual society has returned to a new round of confusion. On the one hand, we are really constrained by policy and can't do it. On the other hand, we have problems with this model, and we have to change it. At this point we will build Tianfu TV, do this thing is not disorderly, there will be planning by the end of 2009, 11 years to complete the planning. (Wang, I2) we found that enterprises show more adaptability to changes now. Instant review also focus on the

state of its own mode and find some deficiencies. We have done too much, and the festival activities in prefectures and cities are more dependent on public relations. This is done by heaven. As organizational experience increases, total organizational improvisation decreases dramatically, followed by increased organizational understanding and acceptance of change and more self-examination.

4.4 From development to transformation (2015-2017)

Through constant exploration and thinking, the audio and video publisher found itself unsuitable for a content provider. At this time, with the rapid development of new media and we-media, a new opportunity has emerged. The government began to put forward the idea of controlling the entrance to the Internet. Wang and I first thought of setting up China's first Internet publishing house. All the things that go out have to go through our Audit mechanism, which is exactly what our party and country need. We thought about these six years ago, but we couldn't do it at that time. (Chen,I2) At this time, the advantages that the audio-visual publishing house as the national control of the media highlighted, the organization also seized this opportunity in time, has obtained a series of Internet content audit, distribution and other qualifications.

Table3 Evidence of organizational responses

Dimensions of action	Source	Exemplary quotation
immediate response	Interview	<p>At that time, the funds allocated by the superiors were far from enough, and my previous plans could not be realized. I went to the superior television station “give me the period of 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. the next day, to put some tape on it.” (Wang,I2)</p> <p>Upon receipt of the news, we went to the area and prefectures around Chengdu to find markets there. (Wang,I2)</p>
intentional creation	Interview	<p>The crazy development of the Internet has made the traditional media have no room for development, we have to change.(Wang,I1)</p> <p>Wang found that these Internet video platforms were not qualified for content audit.(He, I3)</p> <p>We want to layout a new media platform under the party's management of the media. (Wang,I2)</p>
	Text	<p>In 2015, built the first “digital stealth publishing Internet content integrated distribution platform” - Tianfu TV</p> <p>In 2016, the organization won the title of “national copyright demonstration unit”.(Wang,I2)</p>
resource integration	Interview	<p>We didn't have anything except the brand of “party and government media”.(Wang,I2)</p> <p>I went to my superior and got the “junk time” (idle resources), and then I had some channel resources for the supermarket. (Wang,I2)</p> <p>All of these are integrated using the connections in the industry by Wang,(Shi,I2)</p>

From relatively passive and instantaneous response to spontaneous change, the organization has successfully transformed from near bankruptcy to a new media platform. We are doing more than just waiting for policies. We are promoting policies. (Zhang,I2) The continuous process of change keeps the organization fully active, and the continuous internal activity further promotes the organization's improvisation and change. We are always innovating. We are half ahead. We dare not take the lead and always take the lead. (Chen,I2)

4.5 The Process Change

Organizational improvisation plays an important role in promoting continuous change. Here we will make a detailed analysis of each major change to unfold the process of transformation. At the beginning of 2010, Chengdu Audio and Video Publishing House was a marginal traditional media which is on the verge of bankruptcy. It has no main business, no capital, and few employees, so it can only rely on the upper units to survive. At the end of the decade, when the media system began to seek transformation, Chengdu Audio and Video Publishing House did not receive the corresponding financial and resource support, where the resources mainly refer to the television columns, channels or time resources.

Under such circumstances, the person in charge introduced some young technicians, and turned his eyes to the “junk time” that the higher television stations did not attach importance to. Then, a “media + commodity advertising” model came into being. This model developed smoothly. In the second year, he made 17 million yuan in revenue. Unfortunately, this new model was valued by higher-level television stations and decided to set up a special section to do such things. Compared with them, the resources of Chengdu Audiovisual Publishing House are relatively deficient and the scale is even smaller. “After receiving the news, we went to the prefectures, Guangyuan, Xuanhan, Daocheng and Xichang et al. We don't have a market because most of the activities are run by large corporations or higher-level organizations (Wang,I2). In these relatively remote areas, organization began to cooperate with the local government to do the planning and publicity of characteristic culture. When their main business is duplicated by stronger enterprises, audio-visual agencies obviously have a certain path dependence, that is, to quickly turn to resources that are not valued. This is obviously the experience retained by previous changes. So organizations are mainly improvised based on experience.

With the increase of organizational experience and acceptance of change, the organization will be more adaptable when facing new environmental changes, and the degree of organizational improvisation will be reduced. In 2013, after the 18th National Congress of the Party, the cultural publicity business model was restricted by the new national policy. The audio-visual society has returned to a new round of confusion. “On the one hand, we are really constrained by policy and can't do it. On the other hand, we have problems with this model, and we have to change it. At this point we plan to build Tianfu TV, do this thing is not disorderly, it begins at the end of 2009...” (Wang, I2) We can find that enterprises show more adaptability to changes. Instant review starts to focus on the state of its own mode and find some deficiencies. “We have done too much, and the festival activities in prefectures and cities are more dependent on public relations. This is sometimes done by fortune. “(Wang, I2) Enterprises have a general direction of development, although the specific form is not clear, but still persist in trying.

The ambiguity of goals enables enterprises to try more extensively, and is more conducive to breaking through the limitations of traditional models. There is no clear information about the

possible business cooperation and the mode of cooperation, and the project is constantly being pushed forward within the enterprise. At this stage, each employee in the industry has full autonomy, and puts forward a trial business in line with their own and enterprise's resource advantages. The employees need to be responsible for the joint promotion of multiple project business. Enterprises are fully open state, and external uncertainty is internalized through business trying diversity. It fully guarantees the flexibility of internal management, and the activity of business and business.

4.6 A process of continuous emergent change

Combining the scenario trigger, organizational response and process change in the above analysis, we propose a model of continuous change process as figure 1.

Organizational improvisation plays an important role in accepting environmental changes, especially sudden changes, but in the long run, the realization of continuous change requires two wings to be waved at the same time: (1) In response to environmental changes, part of the organizational improvisation experience is retained, forming experience, and promoting the next organizational improvisation; (2) In response to environmental changes, the organization improvisation will activate the internal, which is conducive to the next organization improvisation.

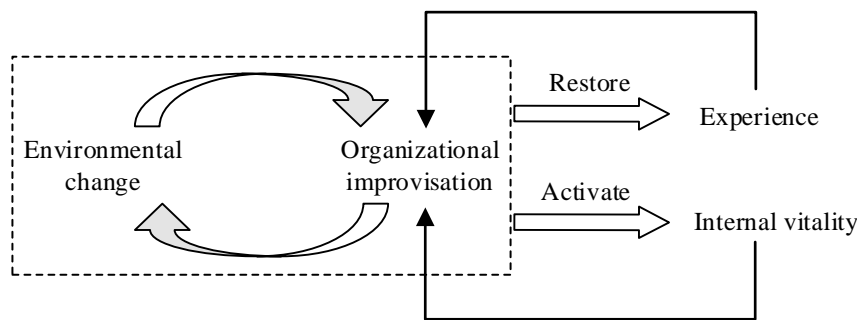


Figure 1 a model of continuous change process

In the long run, **experience-based improvisation** allows organizations to seize opportunities in a faster time without worrying about too much risk; while **complete improvisation** is conducive to better organizational innovation, get rid of the dependence and constraints of the original route, so the joint effect of the two ways ensure the organization's internal vitality, and make it possible for organizations to carry out continuous improvisation, thus promoting the realization of continuous change.

5. CONTRIBUTION

Overall, we make several theoretical contributions to the organizational change literature. Firstly, we reveals the transformation process of organization from emergent approach, thus make new exploration from this perspective. For a long time, stability, convention and order is regarded as the basic characteristics of organization, and “organizational change” is exception^[13]. In fact, change has become an important part of the organization, the organization comes from change, and constantly updated, perfect, and self-generation in the process of change.

Second, Combined with organizational improvisation, we explains how continuous change happen. Despite the theoretical and practical importance of continuous organizational change^{[4][5]}, research to date has not offered a clear theoretical explanation of how small continuous changes may lead to substantial change^{[30][31]}.

In addition, this study found that organizational improvisation is not only a simple integration of

existing resources^{[32][33]}, but also stimulates the organization to tap potential resources, which is more conducive to organizational change and innovation. At the same time, previous studies mostly focused on the organization's improvisational response to a sudden situation, rather than a continuous process. This study explains how organizations can continue to improvise in order to cope with changing circumstances.

REFERENCES

- [1] Saboohi, Nasim, & Sushil.(2011). Revisiting organizational change: exploring the paradox of managing continuity and change. *Journal of Change Management*, 11(2), 185-206.
- [2] Müller, J., & Kunisch, S. (2017). Central perspectives and debates in strategic change research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 1-26.
- [3] Shimoni, B. (2017). What is resistance to change? a habitus-oriented approach. *Academy of Management Executive*, 31(4), amp.2016.0073.
- [4] Leanna, C. R., & Barry, B. (2000). Stability and change as simultaneous experiences in organizational life. *Academy of Management Review*, 25,753–759.
- [5] Pettigrew, A. M., Woodman, R. W., & Cameron, K. S. (2001). Studying organizational change and development: Challenges for future research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 697–713.
- [6] Lewin, K.,(1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social sciences; social equilibria and social change. *Human Relations*, 1(2), 143-153.
- [7]Kotter, J,(1995). Leading change: why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(2),59-67.
- [8] Isabella, L A.(1990). Evolving Interpretations as a Change Unfolds: How Managers Construe Key Organizational Events. *Academy of Management Journal*,3(1),7-41.
- [9]Armenakis, A., Harris,S. & Field,H.,(1999). Paradigms in organizational change: change agent and change target perspective in R.Golembiewski (Ed.), *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, NewYork, Marcel Dekker.
- [10]Bullock, R. & Batten, D. (1985). It's just a phase we're going through: a review and synthesis of OD phase analyses, *Group and Organization Studies*, 10, 383–412.
- [11]Cummings, T. & Huse, E. (1989). *Organization Development and Change* .St. Paul, MN: West.
- [12]Bamford, D.R. & Forrester, P.L. (2003). Managing planned and emergent change within an operations management environment, *International Journal of Operation and Production Management*, 23(5), 546–564.
- [13]Weick K.,&Quinn,R.(1999).Organizational change and development. *American Review of Psychology*, 50, 361–386.
- [14]Plowman D A, Baker L T, Beck T E, et al. (2007). Radical change accidentally: the emergence and amplification of small change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(3), 515-543.
- [15]Wiedner, R., Barrett, M., & Oborn, E. (2017). The emergence of change in unexpected places: resourcing across organizational practices in strategic change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 60(3):823-854.

- [16]Panayiotou A, Putnam L L, Kassinis G. Generating tensions: A multilevel, process analysis of organizational change. *Strategic Organization*, 2017:147612701773444.
- [17]Pettigrew, A. (1992). The character and significance of strategy process research. *Strategic Management Journal*. 13,5-16.
- [18]Van de Ven, A., M. S. Poole. (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*. 20,510-540.
- [19]Weick, K.(1993). Organization design as improvisation. G. P. Huber and W. H. Glick (Eds). *Organization Change and Redesign*. Oxford University Press, New York, 346-379.
- [20]Weick, K.(1998). Improvisation as a mindset for organizational analysis. *Organization. Science*. 9, 543-555.
- [21]Kamoche, K., & Cunha, M. P. E. (2001). Minimal structures: from jazz improvisation to product innovation. *Organization Studies*, 22(5), 733-764.
- [22]Cunha, M. P. E., Cunha, J. V. D., & Kamoche, K. (1999). Organizational improvisation: what, when, how and why. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 1(3), 299-341.
- [23]Miner, A. S., Bassoff, P., & Moorman, C. (2001). Organizational improvisation and learning: a field study. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46(2), 304-337.
- [24]Wang, J., Cao, G., & Jiang, R. (2016). On formation mechanism of organizational improvisation: based on social network and organization learning theories. *Foreign Economics & Management*.
- [25]Akgün, A.E., Byrne, J.C, Lynn, G.S. & Keskin, H. (2007), New product development in turbulent environments: Impact of improvisation and unlearning on new product performance . *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management*, (24): 203-230.
- [26]Akgün, A.E. and Lynn, G.S. (2002), New product development and speed-to-market: An extended model . *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 5(3): 117-129.
- [27]Orlikowski W. J. Improvising Organizational Transformation over Time: A Situated Change Perspective.(1996). *Information Systems Research*,7(1):63~92.
- [28]Siggelkow, N. (2001). Change in the presence of fit: the rise, the fall, and the renaissance of lizclaiborne. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4), 838-857.
- [29]Dutton, J. E., & Dukerich, J. M. (1991). Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34:517–554.
- [30]Grieves, J.(2010). *Organizational change: Themes and issues*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press
- [31]Smets, M., Morris, T., & Greenwood, R. (2012). From practice to field: Multi-level model of practice-driven institutional change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55, 877–904.
- [32]Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(3), 329-366.
- [33]Johannisson,B.,&Olaison, L.(2007).The moment of truth-reconstructing entrepreneurship and social capital in the eye of the storm. *Review of Social Economy*, 65(1), 55-78.