Introduction: History in Organisation Studies

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There have been various calls in the literature more recently for engaging with history in the study of organisations and their management. They have been joined by a number of studies that have either had an explicit historical focus or that have clearly incorporated an historical perspective in their examination of organisational and managerial phenomena. The appeal for greater engagement with history has, for the most part, come as a reaction to the largely ahistorical character that organisation studies has gained during its development as a separate discipline in the second half of the twentieth century. As Kieser has also observed, this has turned out to be the case despite the fact that, in looking back to its roots, the study of organisations can claim a heritage that has been attentive to historical influences. The turn away from history can and has been attributed to the scientistic slant that has come to dominate the field since the 1960s, particularly in North America. As Zald has noted, with such detachment, organisation studies has remained aloof to the more recent debates around the connections of history to social science.

Nevertheless, despite a disciplinary frame that has evolved in the way of discounting history, there are recent signs in the literature of a growing appreciation of historical research and/or an historical perspective in organisational analysis. The indications for a re-emergence of an historical bent have to do, partly at least, with some of the newer and influential research programmes within organisation theory. These include neo-institutionalism and, indeed, evolutionary approaches like population ecology that analyse the development of organisations and organisational populations over time and, thus, can hardly avoid dealing with history. The claims of these central approaches in present-day organisational theorising to incorporating ‘history’ have also spurred some controversy, however. Likewise, several authors have taken issue with the degree to which studies of organisation cultures have been historical or, for that matter, the place history has occupied in some of the post-modern writing that has been inspired by Foucault’s genealogical perspective. Indeed, as attentiveness to history seems to be rising, a considerable degree of diversity and debate appears to be emerging as to what contributions history can make to organisation studies, and how these benefits could be obtained.

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Although, as always, demarcation is not easy and does inevitably involve some simplification, the arguments for and the recourse to history in organisation studies has involved one of three positions, differentiated primarily in terms of the way history is located in relation to the social scientistic slant that has come to characterise organisational analysis. These different positions may be labelled as *supplementarist*, *integrationist* and *reorientationist*, though each have within themselves a range of variations.  

The *supplementarist* position is characterised by adherence to the view that organisational studies is fundamentally a social scientistic, theory-driven enterprise in which attentiveness to history may make some contribution in substantive and/or methodological terms. Substantively, consideration of history is viewed as having potential for confirming and refining general theories. In methodological terms, historical research is seen as a useful aid in variable selection and hypotheses generation within a theoretical context. Variations around the supplementarist position range from bordering on timeless theorising to approaching an integrationist stance. A borderline version is one that does not deny altogether a role for history, but that limits its value to being considered as an element of ‘context’ for testing the generalisability of theories. This is exemplified by Goldman, who considers turning to history very much like doing comparative work, and ‘historical thinking . . . as a useful check for our ideas’. Another version of this approach, as Zald and Kieser have also pointed out, is and has been to employ a particular theoretical frame in analysing and explaining past events. The attempts in which neo-institutional economics is made the basis of historical analyses of corporate formations and the work of North and Thomas and Williamson in this vein provide examples of this particular strategy. As another variant, Lawrence has suggested that an historical perspective ‘included as an everyday consideration in methodological thinking’ would help to specify boundary conditions and enable ‘midrange’ theorising that is characteristic of much of social science. Goodman and Kruger have taken the argument a step further and accorded a significant potential role not only to an historical perspective, but also to historiography in the development of theory and the generation of hypotheses. Kieser has also pointed to the theory development potential of embracing historical analysis in organisation studies. As an example, based on his earlier work, he argues that by applying evolutionary concepts to the historical development of organisations one discovers that ‘evolution mechanisms themselves are subject to evolution’, an important aspect that has been overlooked in current evolutionary approaches.

The *integrationist* position is perhaps best exemplified by Zald’s calls for a focus on the ‘intersection’ and the ‘conjoining’ of historical analysis and the study of particular organisational forms and processes. Engaging with history is a part of Zald’s broader thesis that the field needs to develop its emerging links with the humanities in a way that would also include connecting with literary theory and philosophy. For Zald, this does not, however, entail moving away from the social scientific orientation of organisation studies, but rather involves the need to
re-define the field ‘as a humanistic as well as a scientific area of study’.

Given his concern to invoke linkages with the humanities, Zald does say, in a manner that seems to border with a reorientationist stance, that incorporating history would also entail treatments that dwell on ‘humanistic’ traditions in the latter and would require reflecting actors’ interpretations in shaping organisational action. Nevertheless, his definition of the central substantive and epistemological problems is still integrationist, as he writes, for example, that ‘ultimately the issue is how do we combine a positivistic programme of theoretical and empirical accumulation with the enriching possibilities of the humanities’. This way of framing the link with history clearly resonates with Kieser’s formulation when he states that ‘historical analyses do not replace existing organisation theory; they enrich our understanding of present-day organisations’. In a similar vein, Scott suggests that the ‘best studies’ for explaining institutions ‘present both historical accounts and multivariant analysis’.

For these authors, then, the central issue becomes one of identifying in what domains the ‘enriching’ potential of history can be activated and in what ways this could be done by drawing upon but also challenging the concurrent social scientistic course of organisation studies. Addressing these issues involves, fundamentally, recognising that present organisational forms and arrangements have been shaped by past events and that their course of development has been influenced by the broader context. In terms of more specific concerns, it implies turning to processes of organisational change, development of organisational forms and variations across societal settings, path dependencies and continuities in organisational ideas and practices. Kieser, for example, has argued that in explaining societal differences in organising there is no alternative to reconstructing the course that the development of organisations have taken in societally specific material, social and cultural settings. These reconstructions would need to attend to interactions between organisations and societal conditions and not only to the technological and the economic, but also to educational and religious institutions as well as the role of the state in the process of industrial development. Kieser also points out that, by reconstructing the development of individual organisations, organisational forms and populations or organisational fields over time, one can often discover that features that appear or are pictured as unchangeable are, in fact, the outcome of earlier choices that could have been made differently. Such insights would then help to identify actual choice opportunities. Piore and Sabel provide an example of such an analysis, when they examine districts that had developed a high degree of division of work and compare them with others that had preserved a craft-like production system, in order to argue in favour of work designs with a low degree of specialisation. Confronting current and popular organisational and managerial ideas with practices in the past is also likely to reveal continuities and similarities. Studying the fate of earlier approaches and their features would enable critical assessments of ideas that are currently promulgated. It would be instructive, for example, to analyse the functions of rituals, symbols and myths of the medieval
guild\textsuperscript{36} or the Third Reich\textsuperscript{37} and to compare them with the recent literature on ‘organisational cultures’.\textsuperscript{38}

The integrationist perspective retains concerns with theory and explanation within the ‘social scientific’ tradition. This goes beyond the role the supplementarist position accords to history as a ‘testing ground’ or as a complement in the construction of or refining general theories. The turn that is advocated is towards history and historical analysis as a source of explanatory generalisations or theories. Extant literature suggests two primary modes in which this may be achieved. One of these involves building what Zald has called, though in a more general sense than is meant here, ‘historical theories of organisation’.\textsuperscript{39}

Such theories would have nomological aspirations. Their main tenet is that past events or conditions serve to explain later features and occurrences in organisations at large. The past thus becomes a ‘variable’. Zald cites, for organisation studies, Stinchcombe’s ‘imprinting hypothesis’ (that organisations become imbued with the conditions in the social environment within which they have been founded)\textsuperscript{40} as an archetypal example of this type of theory. The second type of theorising is also based on the premise, as Kieser puts it,\textsuperscript{41} that causal regularities may be found in history. The outcome, however, is usually explanations that are limited in time. It is fundamentally based on an inductive strategy in order to make sense of historical data, though it may also involve using theoretical constructs as ‘ideal types’ or examining different hypotheses that may be drawn from several theories.\textsuperscript{42} The latter strategies would also involve, however, modifying and generating theory as the historical data is confronted.

Put in what may be considered as perhaps a highly stylised fashion, the reorientationist agenda involves moving organisation studies away from its social scientistic aspirations based on the natural sciences model.\textsuperscript{43} The turn to history and the way that this would be done as envisaged within the reorientationist position, constitutes a part of this larger and fundamental re-direction. In this broad sense, it is the social scientistic framing of organisation studies that is being challenged. With respect to the relation between history and organisation studies, it is not only the general a-historic character of the field that is being questioned but also the supplementarist and integrationist positions reviewed above that are rendered as ‘problematic’. Two rather disparate orientations stand out with regard to the role and the nature of engaging with history as an element of the broad transformation that is sought in organisation studies. Again in broad-brush terms, one of these strands involves turning to history and confronting its alternative orientations, methodologies and debates within the framework of studying organisations. So Carter and his colleagues,\textsuperscript{44} for example, in developing the case for a ‘historical perspective’ in organisation studies, identify ‘factual’ and ‘narrative’ arguments as the two alternatives. Although these two approaches have also been considered in some of the supplementarist and integrationist literature,\textsuperscript{45} other possibilities that are raised in these literatures and have been reviewed above are excluded in the way Carter and his colleagues categorise the calls for more history in organisations. The reorientationist stance prioritises the
narrative approach to history, in line with the recent broader interest in interpretive or discursive orientations as opposed to the scientistic framing of organisational studies. Yet another approach that Carter et al. do consider, but are largely critical of, namely the one inspired by Foucauldian genealogy, constitutes the second strand in the reorientationist position. Foucault and, more broadly, perspectives loosely labelled as postmodern, have had a significant influence, in the last decade or so on management and organisation studies, especially outside North America. As reviewed by Rowlinson and Carter in some detail, the postmodern genre, as a more general attack on the prevailing social scientistic orientation of organisation studies, has generated some literature that leans towards history by using the genealogical method, as exemplified by Jacques’ work on managerial thinking in the US.

II

The essays in this special issue reflect to a considerable degree the diversity sketched above that has been taking shape as history is being brought back into organisation studies via different routes. Some of the contributions extend and sharpen a particular position that has been depicted above. Others, embedded as they are in a particular perspective, provide examples of strategies that have or may be employed in conducting historically informed or historically orientated research within organisation studies.

The essay by Clark and Rowlinson is a full exposé of one of the major strands of what we have labelled above as the reorientationist position. These authors explicitly call for a ‘historic turn’ as part of a broader transformation in the study of organisations. Clark and Rowlinson specify their call by arguing that the ‘turn’ would or should entail, first, a move away from conceptualising organisational studies as a ‘branch of the science of society’. This is to be accompanied by an alignment with the narrative turn in history itself. Past events would thus be viewed as ‘context’ and ‘process’ and not as a ‘variable’ and would require engagement with the debates around what is made of history and how this is done. In their essay, Clark and Rowlinson provide a thorough review of, and take issue with, almost all the alternative positions that in one way or another have made claims towards ‘including’ history in their analytical, empirical, narrative or normative schemata. They specifically consider organisational economics, organisational sociology and organisational symbolism as well as some of the postmodern-inspired writing and the popular managerialist literature. Clark and Rowlinson conclude that the scientistic slant in much of organisational economics and organisational sociology as well as the ethnography of studies on organisation cultures are essentially ‘resistant’ to a turn to history that is or would be transformational. Neither is there any possibility of the kind in the popular literature for managers, which has burgeoned in the last couple of decades. Nevertheless, Clark and Rowlinson do identify several examples in the sociologically orientated literature on organisations, as well as in studies of
organisational cultures, and indeed in some of the postmodernist writing, that privilege narrative and that can therefore be taken as signs of a move towards the kind of history they argue is needed in organisation studies.

Leblebici and Shah’s essay is an elaboration, par excellence, of the integrationist position. These authors also begin by critically reviewing some of the organisations literature that has made claims towards ‘taking history seriously’, considering also the debates around the relations between history and sociology. Their central premise is that these debates have remained unresolved and what needs to be done to overcome them within organisation studies is ‘to integrate the concepts and methods of history and of organisational theory’.50 Understanding organisations, according to Leblebici and Shah, requires both timeless universal theorising and interpretations of actors’ intentions and actions vis-à-vis historical events. This is to be achieved by ‘historical organisation theories’ that ‘encapsulate both explanation and description’. Extending similar calls in extant literature, Leblebici and Shah argue that such integration can be obtained by identifying research issues or questions where history and organisation studies intersect and thus provide a platform where there can be a meaningful and fruitful dialogue between the two for building and/or testing theory as well as making sense of historical events. The temporal logic inherent in the process, as opposed to the more conventional, variance approaches in organisational analysis,51 not only makes time and periods an element of explanation, but also opens up space, methodologically, for narrative accounts as well as social scientific techniques of quantification. Leblebici and Shah employ their perspective in addressing the problematic of structure, agency and action, a core question in sociology and, for that matter, one in organisation studies too, though probably more so on the European side of the Atlantic.52 They illustrate their perspective by an examination of the evolution of business incubator organisations in the latter part of the twentieth century in the United States. Their narrative, theoretical and descriptive, shows how organisation theory can be useful in historical interpretation and how, when history is bracketed with reference to the framework that is employed, specific historical explanations can be developed; a perspective and an illustration, as the authors also point out, that is clearly different from prevailing approaches in organisation theory.

The contribution by Üsdiken, Kieser and Kjaer could also be considered as another example that borders on the integrationist position. At one level, the study by Üsdiken et al. is a piece of historical research, especially as they deal comparatively with the pre-1950s development of the Betriebswirtschaftslehre (BWL) as a discipline within the context of evolving organisational forms for business education not only in its home ground, Germany, but also in two settings where it was imported, namely, Denmark and Turkey. Although it was known that the German BWL had influenced the latter two countries,53 the early stages of the forms and the content of business education in these countries had received little attention from researchers. Üsdiken et al., however, do not simply provide an account of the importation of BWL into these two countries. They also compare
its subsequent progress in all three countries and establish that the German model underwent modification in form and content as it was transplanted into Denmark and Turkey. Üsdiken et al. then proceed to describe and account for the different trajectories and indeed outcomes of the ‘institutionalisation’ of BWL in the three countries by drawing upon the recent turns in neo-institutionalist thinking that have begun to move away from a focus on identical reproduction and, therefore, on homogeneity. In doing so, they recognise first the similarities in the processes of and the struggles around the creation and (in this particular case) diffusion of institutions within organisational contexts. In line with the more recent orientations in neo-institutionalism, the authors also acknowledge the interactive nature of institutional creation and diffusion that is accommodative of strategic action and appreciative of the multiplicity in institutional environments. They therefore consider the academic, economic and the political frameworks in each country within which actors manoeuvred and the BWL took shape. So this study is very much in line with what Kieser defined as one of the prime purposes of historical organisation studies: namely, that the explanation of societal differences in organisational forms and practices requires a reconstruction of the courses of development in their specific societal settings. Moreover, it is an example of a research strategy that is based on a theoretical frame but remains open to specific hypotheses in explaining adaptation to specific conditions that impinge upon the development of institutions.

The last two essays in the special issue are both more in the tradition of what we have labelled as the supplementarist position. The essay by Chacar and Hesterly is again firstly a study, based on primary and secondary sources, on the history, as an organisational form, of Major League Baseball (MLB) in the United States. One major objective of the authors is to set the record straight, so to speak, and to demonstrate that the widespread view that baseball has been an ‘epitome of consistency’ in the US is not an accurate description of its evolution in that country. As they do that, they are also able to show that the extent of innovations has varied over time, which they specify further by the periodisation they introduce. After a period of experimentation, a phase of institutionalisation set in, during which a high level of resistance to change could be observed. Finally, an era of innovation at the league level was resumed, driven largely by economic motives. Chacar and Hesterly are able to conclude, again in a manner contrary to prevailing discourse about stability, that innovation was beneficial in economic terms for the MLB. They also argue that their account is more in line with the claims in the literature that institutional change is prompted not by exogenous shocks but internally through the actions of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’. With these conclusions, the authors move to the theoretical realm, suggesting that their study offers insights with regard to theorising on institutional evolution and change, thus providing an example of historical research as a source of inductively derived propositions for theory development.

Innovation is also a central theme in Ganter’s essay on French high quality restaurants, again an organisational population that has clearly been little studied
in the organisation literature. Based on secondary sources and interview data, Ganter traces the evolution of such restaurants in France and the concomitant changes in work organisation which they experienced. It is thus a study of organisational epochs. In addition to considering the specific conditions that have been at play in transitions to a new phase, Ganter also attempts to identify more general patterns. He argues, for example, that despite the perspective of craftsmanship that, for a long time, has prevailed in interpretations of the development of cooking in French restaurants, the original orientation in each of the epochs has followed the example and model of industry, though with some modifications and time lags. Ganter’s essay is thus another demonstration that ‘new’ types of organisation often turn out to be ‘old’ structures that are imported from other fields and are ‘promoted’ as innovative ones.

At the most fundamental level, the essays in this special issue constitute a collection of studies on a range of organisations and organisational fields relatively little studied in the literature, certainly in historical terms. They also provide examples of different strategies with regard to the ‘how’ of conducting studies of organisations with a historical focus. Most significantly, perhaps, the essays reflect the emerging diversity as more calls and engagements are made for bringing history back into organisation studies. Some of them in particular help to clarify and sharpen alternative persuasions as to the ways in which history needs to be brought back and should therefore serve as valuable additions to the emerging debates over how this ought to happen.

NOTES

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7. For example, S. Clegg, C. Hardy and W.D. Nord (eds.), *A Handbook of Organization Studies*, published in London in 1996, had only one item in its index that was related to history – and only in the context of ‘action research’. J.A.C. Baum’s edited *Companion to Organizations*, on the other hand, published in 2002 in Oxford, has a history section in its subject index, with references to items like historical contingency, historical origins, historical relativism, historicism, historiographic research and organisational histories.


12. See, for example, B.S. Lawrence, ‘Historical Perspective: Using the Past to Study the Present’, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol.9 (1984), p.311


14. Zald refers to this as the ‘testing ground’ approach in his ‘History, Sociology and Theories of Organization’, p.103.


20. Lawrence, ‘Historical Perspective’, pp.308–9, 311.
30. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, p.95 (emphasis added).
32. See, for example, N. Biggart and M.F. Guillén, ‘Developing Difference: Social Organization and the Rise of the Auto Industries of South Korea, Taiwan, Spain and Argentina’, *American Sociological Review*, Vol.64 (1999), pp.722–47, as an example of a study where this is done.
42. Ibid., pp.617–18.
44. Ibid.
45. For example, Zald, ‘History, Sociology and Theories of Organization’, pp.102–3; idem, ‘More Fragmentation’, p.256.
46. See also Clark and Rowlinson’s article in this issue.
50. Emphasis added.
51. See, for example, Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, pp.92–5.