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History, Memory, and the Past in Management and Organization Studies

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# FORUM

## Invited article

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## HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE PAST IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Our goals for this editorial are threefold. First, we contextualize the growing interest of management and organization scholars in matters of history, memory, and the past. Despite the increasing number of historical organization studies, functionalism and functional-interpretivism remain the dominant approaches in management and organization studies (MOS). Moreover, because European and North American scholars are overrepresented in the literature, analysis of the historical impact of global trade and multinational organizations on the relationship between the global North and South is limited. Second, we map the literature that connects history, memory, and the past to organizations and organizing. We provide an overview of MOS scholars' initial efforts to develop humanist approaches to organization studies and discuss the role history plays in informing epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and empirical conversations in the field. Third, we highlight specifically how the articles in this special issue contribute to the body of historical organization literature.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF HISTORICAL ORGANIZATION STUDIES

For more than 30 years, management and organization scholars have been grappling with the task of reconnecting history to organization studies. It has been a steep climb since a group of pioneer academics highlighted that organizations are historical phenomena and called for a more humanistic (Zald, 1990, 1993) research agenda based on historical analysis and a deeper understanding of both the historical context and the past (Kieser, 1994; Lawrence, 1984). The emergence of the "historic turn" (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Mills, Suddaby, Foster, & Durepos, 2016) has changed our understanding of the roles played by the past, history, and memory in management and organization studies (MOS).

However, despite the growing interest in incorporating matters of time, memory, and history into various strands of MOS research, there are some concerning gaps. First, there has been limited engagement of scholars with critical and postmodern approaches (Durepos, Shaffner, & Taylor, *in press*). Specifically, post-colonial (Decker, 2013), decolonial (Wanderley & Barros, 2018), and ANTI-historical (Durepos & Mills, 2012) approaches to studying the past are not represented within the MOS literature. These perspectives are also largely absent from recent special issues on history, memory, and the past that have been published by mainstream journals. As research motivated by the historic turn matures, we expect increasingly rich and diverse scholarly ideas.

Second, much of the discussion regarding historical organization studies has taken place in Europe and North America. Although similar concerns have been voiced elsewhere in the world (e.g., Brazil), the number of publications on the subject do not represent the increasing number of scholars theorizing about the intersection between organizing and the past. This lack of research from regions other than the global North is one explanation for the limited discussions about the interplay between place and culture, on the one hand, and time, history, and memory on the other.

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To explain and further explore the impact of the historic turn on management scholarship, we need to produce knowledge of general interest that is embedded in local realities. In other words, MOS scholars need to account for how place shapes the experience of time to construct different histories. The global South has its own experiences to share; thus, it is important to account for how relationships among countries and companies from different cultures and nationalities have informed and transformed each other.

Third, high-quality international research outlets present particular barriers for disseminating research conducted by non-English-speaking scholars. Restricting communications to a single linguistic frame hampers the ability of these researchers to express their thoughts. Because presentation of the past cannot be dissociated from the language and vocabulary used to experience and talk about it, there are rich, specialized research traditions in languages other than English that have been silenced and ignored. This has limited the reach and pace of research on important issues related to the historic turn.

Despite these limitations, historical organizational studies offer insight into the different mechanisms of organizations and organizing. In particular, these studies have launched discussions about the epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and empirical underpinnings of MOS research. In the following sections, we briefly review these discussions and highlight some current critiques of the field.

## Epistemological

One of the major criticisms raised by scholars of the historic turn has been the ahistorical character of most research on management and organizations (Kieser, 1994; Zald, 1990). Both business historians and organization scholars familiar with the use of historical methods in organizational research have articulated this critique. (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004). As Clark and Rowlinson (2004, p. 346) wrote at the time, the historic turn would “entail questioning the scientific rhetoric of organisation studies, an approach to the past as process and context, and not merely as a variable, and an engagement with historiographical debates, especially regarding the epistemological status of narrative.”

Others have also questioned how the philosophical tenets of history impact MOS research. For example, many MOS research projects take a naïve-realist view of history. The assumption that there is an straightforward correspondence between history and the past has been taken for granted in MOS. Coraiola, Foster, and

Suddaby (2015), however, argue that many ahistorical research projects, when examined more closely, are, in fact, historical. The distinction is that most MOS researchers fail to reflect on their taken-for-granted assumptions about history and the past. As a path forward, some scholars have called for researchers to move beyond historical cognizance (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014) to develop historical consciousness (Suddaby, 2016).

In spite of these efforts, MOS scholars continue to be criticized for their limited engagement with history and the past. Some have noted that attempts to integrate history and organization studies may lead down a path where the epistemological importance of history is dismissed. The unfortunate consequence is that history is treated merely as a method and/or a variable (Decker, 2016). Others, particularly CMS scholars, have argued that the original intent of the historic turn has been only partially fulfilled. As a result, much work remains to reject the supremacy of scientificism in organizational theory, recognize other modes of studying and representing the past, and grant legitimacy to heterogenous forms of writing history (Durepos et al., in press).

## Theoretical

MOS scholars have largely conflated history and the past (Weatherbee, Durepos, Mills, & Mills, 2012), as seen in two major MOS approaches. One approach is research on imprinting and the study of the effect of past foundational events on present-day individuals, organizations, and institutions (e.g., Marquis, 2003; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). The other is the study of path dependence and the notion that actions in the past may limit possible actions in the present and future (e.g., Sydow & Schreyögg, 2013; Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). Both approaches equate the past and what occurred in the past with history and how the past is narrated.

More recently, there have been efforts to minimize the determinism of those approaches by redefining the past and how it is understood within organizations. For instance, the logic of sedimentation has informed the concept of imprinting. Instead of an age-related event associated with an organization’s founding, more recent accounts consider the possibility that later events might also be foundational and create different layers of cohort-effects (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Similarly, path dependence scholars have redefined their approach to incorporate paths not taken that might still be available as flotsam and jetsam, which potentially become endogenous resources for change (Schneiberg, 2007). By equating history with the past, both approaches fail to explore what is truly distinctive about history. History matters

because it is a narrative that imposes order and meaning on things past. In other words, the stories we tell about the past are what make the past meaningful and manageable.

Nevertheless, definitional imprecision has meant that narratives and history are often assumed to be the same. This has led some MOS scholars to blur and misunderstand the difference between key constructs such as history and collective memory. However, when examined more closely, there are important and significant differences between the two (Nora, 1989). In metaphorical terms, history is the tale told by a foreign explorer while collective memory is the recollection of shared experiences. History is the product of purposeful research and writing that takes place in the present and looks back at the past. It presumes discontinuity and distance between the actors of the past and the authors of history. History, then, has an identifiable author whose authority about the past is attached to the sources used to tell the tale.

Collective memory is distinct from history because it evolves in uncertain and unpredictable ways. What is remembered (forgotten) is disseminated through narratives that are passed down (discarded) from generation to generation. Collective memory is emergent and has no clear author. The weight and authority of collective memory is provided by a specific mnemonic community's traditions and beliefs (Zerubavel, 1996). History and memory, although different and distinct, can be thought of as alternative perspectives on the past (Nora, 1989). Each provides complementary, contradictory, and corresponding descriptions and interpretations of the past, and their interaction requires better theorization by future research.

The original conception of organizational memory was as a repository where past information was stored to be retrieved for future use (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Organizational memory, thus, was understood as the site/location where the organization's information was stored. The introduction of the historic turn, however, led to questioning the static, storage-bin approach to organizational memory. This questioning promoted development of a more dynamic approach to organizational memory analogous to discussions about collective memory. Discussions about organizational memory were soon redefined, and, in particular, it became generally accepted as a process rather than a storage site. Consequently, other processes of organization memory, such as remembering and forgetting (Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010), soon became relevant topics for investigation.

The shift in understanding of organizational memory has led to new conversations about how the past is remembered and forgotten and to the emergence of a new field of Organizational

Memory Studies (Foroughi, Coraiola, Rintamaki, Mena, Foster, *In press*). Discussions about memory have also taken place elsewhere, most remarkably in the research on rhetorical history (Suddaby, Foster, & Trank, 2010) and the uses of the past (Wadhvani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018). However, history and memory remain largely conflated in this literature. Recent calls for a more reflexive engagement with the distinction between the two constructs (Decker, Hassard, Rowlinson, *In press*) should lead to less blurred boundaries and a more precise understanding of the unique contribution of history and memory to our understanding of management and organizations.

## Methodological

There have been various calls for using historical and archival research methods in MOS (e.g., Kieser, 1994; Lawrence, 1984; Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). In fact, MOS scholars have regularly used historical archives as a data source for developing empirical research. However, for most, the past was merely a field for theory testing. There was little recognition of the importance of context, critique of sources, hermeneutic interpretation, and the role of footnotes in historical explanations. Moreover, excluding studies by a small number of scholars attuned to the debates and specific demands of historiographic research (e.g., Rowlinson, 2004), most MOS research failed to fully grasp the potential of archival and historical research.

Two publications broke new ground by more forcefully introducing a historical understanding of MOS research. Rowlinson et al. (2014) clarified some core assumptions about historical research and contrasted them to the traditional understandings of MOS scholars. Similarly, Bucheli and Wadhvani (2014) curated a collection of papers that explore the connection between history and theory in different fields and approaches, as well as some of the methodological aspects that should be considered when using historical methods. Both publications joined business historians and organization scholars in common conversations that have helped provide guidance on using historical methods in organization studies.

Current discussions have aided further methodological engagement with history and its role in organization studies. For example, Maclean, Harvey, and Clegg (2016, 2017) changed that conversation by advocating historical organization studies as a distinct field and developing an approach that seeks to integrate history and MOS. They redefined the divide based on the concept of "dual integrity," which suggests that organizational history should comply with the standards of both history and organization

studies. Their efforts were joined by other attempts to bridge the two fields. Gill, Gill, and Roulet (2018) interpreted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach to naturalistic inquiry, translating their criteria of trustworthiness into corresponding historical methodological elements to enhance the appeal of historical narratives to an audience of organizational scholars. Similarly, Barros, Carneiro, and Wanderley (2019) discussed the role of reflexivity in archival research and historical narratives, contending that reflexivity is key to unpacking the socially constructed nature of archival sources and establishing a historical narrative as one possible representation of the past.

## Empirical

Historical organization scholars have conducted several empirical studies. For example, these scholars have explored topics such as organizational identity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Lamertz, Foster, Coraiola, & Kroezen, 2016; Ravasi, Rindova, & Stigliani, 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), change (Brunninge, 2009; Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2014; Ybema, 2014), legitimacy (Illia & Zamparini, 2016; McGaughey, 2013; Voronov, Clercq, & Hinings, 2013), and corporate responsibility (Coraiola & Derry, 2020; Lent & Smith, in press). This exciting and rapidly growing field of research has much to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of management and organizations.

History's emancipating promise, however, is still far from realized in MOS. For example, the increasing interest in historical corporate social responsibility has brought consideration of important issues to the forefront. Studies have called for a better understanding of oppression as a lesson for the future (e.g., Martí & Fernández, 2013; Sørensen, 2014). For example, Cooke (2003) has persuasively argued for more research on the relationship between management and slavery. Godfrey, Hassard, O'Connor, Rowlinson, and Ruef (2016) took note of this call and proposed an agenda for examining slavery, its role in colonial policies, and the consequences of those practices for current cases of modern slavery.

In addition, we suggest that MOS scholars focus on other populations that were affected by the development of colonial activities and still bear the weight of that past. One example is the historical contributions of minorities such as African Americans (e.g., Prieto & Phipps, 2016). This involves intensifying the research on the impact of colonial relationships in different geographies, such as Latin America (e.g., Wanderley & Barros, 2018), Africa (e.g., George, Corbishley, Khayesi, Haas, & Tihanyi, 2016), and Australasia (e.g., Mika & O'Sullivan, 2014).

Developing a research agenda that studies the first inhabitants of these places is critical. Indigenous views on the past and organizing are also under-researched and even forgotten (Bastien, Coraiola, & Foster, 2021). Similar to the prejudice and lack of fair conditions African descendants face, apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2017), indigenous peoples have been largely absent from MOS.

Another important research area is the study of immigrants and refugees (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Phillips & Hardy, 1997). Like other minorities, immigrants and refugees face issues that include displacement, prejudice, inequality, and cultural assimilation. The historical circumstances behind the mobility of large numbers of people are usually extremely meaningful and have an impact that can last for many generations. For example, there are complex historical relationships between European immigrants, trafficked slaves, and native populations in countries such as Brazil and the US, where historical prejudice persists and deeply affects existing opportunities for descendants of different social groups (e.g., Souza, 2003). Historical organization studies are particularly well positioned to shed light on complex issues that cross multiple generations.

## PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

One objective of this special issue is to provide an initial corrective to the discussions outlined above. To accomplish this, we cast a wide net in our call for papers that are inclusive and capture the best contributions to historical organization studies outside the boundaries of the mainstream journals in the field. This appeals to RAE's identity as a prominent publication from the global South that has always valued authorship diversity and a variety of theoretical approaches. The peer-reviewed papers and invited essays by esteemed Brazilian scholars provide an overview and critique of the current state of the field. These five articles, along with our editorial, are indicative of the quality of scholarship that falls outside mainstream publications in the field and exemplify the increasing engagement of scholars bridging the North-South divide.

Costa and Wanderley (2021) wrote our invited essay. They show how history and memory gradually became a regular feature of management and organization studies in Brazil. Advocating that a Brazilian scientific community interested in the past and its uses already exists, the authors examine the expansion of the literature in management, memory, and history since the 2000s. They revisit the most prevalent topics and how they relate to the broader international historic turn. Costa and Wanderley conclude

by suggesting how Brazilian scholars may contribute to moving the historic turn forward.

Paludi, J. Mills, and A. Mills (2021) analyze the archives of Pan American Airways to reveal the company's historical discourses concerning Latinos and Latin America. They argue that the colonial divide between Iberian and British colonists has informed how Latin American people have been represented. These representations impact how Latin Americans understand themselves and how they are portrayed around the world. The authors advance the debate on history as epistemology on three levels. First, they present a revisionist account of the past based on decolonial feminist theory. In clarifying their episteme beforehand, they disclose the ideological underpinnings of their reading of the past and embrace an alternative approach to research as a political statement. Second, they recognize and engage with the narrative nature of history, developing systematic efforts to unpack the grand narratives and social representations that characterize the historical discourse of PanAm and Latin America. Third, they present a meaningful case of a multinational company from the global North that operated in the global South. Their discussion explores the consequences of storytelling and the impact this has on Latin America's international image and reputation.

Cappelen and Pedersen (2021) skillfully articulate how organizations avoid mission drift and identity dilution by tapping into the past. Their paper weaves together the constructs of temporal focus, organizational remembering and forgetting, and identity narratives to explain how organizations may remain true to themselves as they move through the changes imposed by internal resource needs and external stakeholder pressures. They describe how a Danish non-profit organization dedicated to developing school gardens shifted its temporal focus as it began to expand. Investments in growth and scale were supported by narratives that emphasized a vision for the future instead of past achievements as its core organizational identity. The perception of mission drift and an uncertain organizational purpose motivated organizational members to reengage with the non-profit's past and recraft their identity narratives around a broader sense of purpose, encompassing their role in the broader school garden movement. Analyzing this process, the authors conclude that although memory is an important resource that can be used to craft identity narratives, it also provides a temporal anchor to prevent organizations from drifting away from their fundamental essence because of future-oriented plans.

Tureta, Américo, and Clegg (2021) offer an important methodological contribution to the development of ANTi-history research. They argue that controversy analysis provides

a promising path to the ANTi-historical study of the past. In particular, the authors suggest development of a cartographical approach to controversy mapping may be a useful way to trace historical silences and generate a more complete understanding of contemporary presences and absences. They offer four main criteria that should guide the choice of controversies to be analyzed. First, researchers should be sensitive to past controversies. Second, they should embrace cold controversies, that is, the non-controversial. Third, they should focus on underground controversies that have been marginalized and silenced by other powerful actors. Fourth, they should be conscientious when approaching boundless controversies, since analyzing them might demand great effort and many resources. The authors then offer a series of steps that can be followed when developing ANTi-history research based on controversy analysis to move from individual controversies to production of a cartographical approach.

Silva, Vasconcelos, and Lira (2021) deliver an important contribution about the role of accounting inscriptions in the process of ending slavery in Brazil by examining the creation of the slaves' National Emancipation Fund. The authors analyze the Brazilian government's use of the Fund as a governmentality mechanism. That is, the government created the Emancipation Fund partially to reduce and minimize the power of slave owners by making slaves and their work visible. In so doing, the government constructed a path toward a gradual transition from slave labor to wage labor. Their historical research clarifies an important mechanism that contributed to the end of slavery in Brazil. As such, it speaks to the accounting history literature and the use of accounting as a governmentality instrument. Moreover, it offers important insights about the use of accounting as an institutional mechanism for social change that might inform future policies regarding slavery.

## Moving forward

A number of opportunities arise as the field of historical organization studies develops and matures. One way forward is to encourage scholars to heighten their awareness of a common field of research among scholars interested in studying the past. Coraiola and Murcia (in press) argue that it is time to engage in conversations about "organizational mnemonics." This entails more engaged discussions about the various historical research paradigms and a more explicit critique of the naivety of some approaches to studying the past. Paradigmatic reflexivity can broaden our understanding of the historical assumptions and

premises that inform organizational studies. Further, closer engagement among scholars from different research communities within the field of organizational mnemonics can lead to a better understanding of the connections among related constructs such as knowledge, memory, and ignorance.

Allied with this, it is important to recognize the peripheral and underrepresented role of critical approaches to study of the past. In comparison to functionalist and interpretivist views, there is space to develop and expand critical approaches to organizations and organizing. Recent calls for developing a critical organizational history (Durepos et al., in press) have recognized this gap and offered important insights for moving the field forward.

As part of the purpose for developing a more diverse and inclusive field of historical organization studies, we also posit that there is a need to recognize that time and space are intrinsically connected. This is central to decolonial approaches such as the one proposed by Wanderley and Barros (2018), who argue that the geopolitics of knowledge influence the agenda for historical organization studies. To combat this hegemonic imposition, they call for more discussion of regional histories and epistemic encounters across borders. A more inclusive research field will likely bring novel ideas from new scholars who were previously excluded from these conversations. Constructing a more open and diverse agenda is consistent with the notion of “pluralistic understanding” advocated by Maclean et al. (2016, 2017). This concept recognizes the richness of approaches in the field and promotes a more egalitarian one for historical organization studies.

Another possibility for future studies that emerges from a more reflexive engagement with the past is history’s role in management education. We contend that history is important and should be taught in business schools, but why and how history should be taught for management students is not completely clear. For instance, the old assumption that the past instructs the present is questioned on the grounds that history does not repeat itself. This calls for reiterating the value of history and memory for management education. For example, how can a better global understanding of the development of management education contribute to the development of management students and educators (Cummings & Bridgman, 2016)? Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, and Rowlinson’s (2017) new history of management offers some suggestions. The authors use a new lens to revisit management history, historicizing important constructs within the management field. They argue that we need to understand the origins of management thought to avoid reproducing historical biases and misunderstandings—for example, Maslow’s pyramid (Bridgman,

Cummings, & Ballard, 2019)—as a way to develop alternative understandings about management’s changing role in society.

Relatedly, there have been various efforts to understand the global spread of management ideas and diffusion of business schools. For example, Cooke and Alcadipani (2015) showed how the introduction of business schools in Brazil was the result of a broader movement for the Americanization of management education. Maclean, Shaw, Harvey, and Booth (2020) clarified the development of British management education and the role of knowledge networks and communities of practice in forming management learning in interwar Britain. Both suggest the tenets of American exceptionalism were not as readily accepted as commonly assumed but were challenged and translated to these different realities. These studies provide an important direction for future research and also have relevance for management practice. As Tennent, Gillett, and Foster (2020) argue, students should be more aware of the field’s history and capable of developing a historical consciousness. This calls for a more dynamic approach toward history and the narratives that frame how we perceive the past. An enhanced understanding of the past and its connection to history and memory may thus contribute to a more emancipatory ideal of historical research in MOS.

To conclude, the aim of this special issue is to foster greater pluralism and inclusivity in historical organization studies. The articles in this issue address a number of key issues, such as the importance of place in how history unfolded, the importance of the work of scholars from the global South, and critiques of existing functionalist approaches to management and organizational studies. Although just a start, the studies in this issue collectively contribute to a continuing, pluralistic agenda.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors declare that they participated in all stages of development of the manuscript. All authors worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, the theoretical review, and worked together in the writing and final revision of the manuscript.