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The Treatment of History in Organisation Studies: Towards an 'Historic Turn'?

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There is an increasing call for an historical perspective in organisation studies. In this essay we want to assess the major research programmes in organisation studies in relation to the 'historic turn' that has transformed the way other branches of the social sciences and humanities 'go about their business'.[1] The historic turn is part of a wider transformation that is alluded to in terms such as the 'discursive turn', deconstruction and post-modernism. Within history itself this transformation is associated with hermeneutics, the 'linguistic turn', and the revival of narrative.[2] However, we feel that the term 'historic turn' may prove useful in marshalling support for calls for more history, and a different approach to history, within organisation studies, rather than subsuming it under labels that do not emphasise the historical aspect.

An historic turn would represent a transformation of organisation studies in at least three senses. First, it would represent a turn *against* the view that organisation studies should constitute a branch of the science of society. This would parallel the 'linguistic turn' in history, where 'the question ''how is history like and unlike fiction?'' has replaced ''how is history like and unlike science?'' as the guiding question of metahistorical reflection'. The linguistic turn in history is an instance of the general displacement of 'the Scientific Attitude' by 'the Rhetorical Attitude'.[3] Second, as in other fields, an historic turn would involve 'a contentious and by no means well-defined turn *towards* history – as past, process, context, and so on',[4] but not necessarily towards the most adjacent branch of history, which in the case of organisation studies would be business history. Finally, an historic turn would entail a turn to historiographical debates and historical theories of interpretation that recognise the inherent ambiguity of the term 'history' itself, which refers to both 'the totality of past human actions, and ... the narrative or account we construct of them'.[5] This would necessitate greater reflection on the place of historical narrative in organisation studies.

An argument can be made that organisation studies has already become more historical. The new institutional economics of Coasian heritage, as opposed to the old institutionalism of Veblen and Commons, has had considerable influence on the rise of organisational economics, which is certainly more historical than orthodox neoclassical economics. The resource-based view of the firm derived from Penrose and evolutionary economics, with its emphasis on path dependence,

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represents a further departure from neoclassical orthodoxy and takes even more account of history. The sociological versions of new institutionalism and organisational ecology that have developed within organisation studies both take more account of an historical dimension than structural contingency theory which previously dominated organisational sociology. Finally, the rise of the organisational culture and symbolism discourse facilitated more attention to process and promised to make organisation studies more historical. However, we want to question whether, even as organisation studies has become more historical, the treatment of history could be said to correspond to an historic turn. It is from this sceptical standpoint that we intend to review the treatment of history in the major discourses of organisational economics, organisational sociology and organisational culture.

We have discussed elsewhere the implications for business history of entering into a dialogue with organisation theory,[6] but we should note here that business historians are increasingly prepared to engage with related fields, especially strategy and organisation studies.[7] This engagement is part of an effort by business historians to refute the familiar criticism of being 'inveterate empiricists',[8] and to realise the potential of their work 'to inform contemporary managerial decision-making, influence public opinion, and enhance scientific knowledge of firms'.[9] Our review should serve as a warning for business historians to be wary of the apparent accommodation of history in organisation studies.

Given the ever-expanding literature in the discourses of organisation studies, we have chosen to focus on foundational statements and major collections rather than lapse into a running commentary on the latest minor revisions purporting to represent paradigm shifts. Rather than attempt a definition of organisation in order to delimit it as a field of study, we find it convenient to view organisation studies and related areas of strategy as a cluster of research programmes held together by the discourse of specific communities of theorists with overlapping interests. Our review necessarily reflects our own backgrounds in organisational sociology, our longstanding concern with inter-disciplinary debate within organisation studies, especially between economics and sociology, as well as our own experience of archival research and continuing efforts to produce theoretically informed historical accounts of organisations.[10]

II

The calls from leading organisation theorists, such as Kieser, Zald, Jacques and Burrell, for more history in organisation studies, or for history of a different stripe, can be seen as a manifestation of unease with the treatment of history amongst a minority within the field.[11] Whether or not these authors would associate themselves with an historic turn, each of them has identified particular problems in the prevailing approaches to history in organisation studies which set the scene for our review. Kieser's call for more interpretive and inductive analyses of

history in organisation studies, in the style of Weber's ideal types, is set out in opposition to the subordination of history to 'general models, i.e., models that are conceptualized independently of the phenomena which are to be explained'.[12] In an all too predictable response to Kieser, Goldman argues that 'historical issues' are already tackled in influential research by organisational ecologists and new institutionalists. As a counter to Kieser's call to abandon general models, Goldman contends that 'without agreed-upon theory that transcends time and place [in the mode of physics or biology], history becomes data, not explanation'. In what amounts to an assertion that organisation studies is incompatible with an historic turn Goldman maintains that history can only be reintegrated into organisation theory if it is accepted that 'insofar as theory refers to principles of organization that transcend time and space, historical and comparative (that is international and/or multicultural) data can test the generalizability and utility of a theory'.[13]

In a series of articles, Zald has argued for a reconceptualisation of organisation studies as a humanistic enterprise to which history can make a major contribution. In the latest of these articles, Zald complains that the social sciences which underpin teaching in business schools 'have been so cut off from humanistic thinking' that:

> the way of approaching problems is likely to be universalist and presentist. It reinforces the presentist and universalist tendencies of abstracted general theory and of the scientific model that the social sciences took over from the exemplar sciences. Social science cut itself off from history. Moreover, in the search for general and abstracted laws, it cut itself off from context and configuration; it ignored alternative models.[14]

Jacques also makes 'a case for the practical value of historical perspective', and concludes that an historical perspective will be 'invaluable', indeed unavoidable, if organisation studies is 'expected to provide a critically reflective vision of the good society, or inform debate between alternative visions of that society'.[15] Burrell objects to the separation of business disciplines from the social sciences and humanities, especially sociology and history, which has 'allowed business teachers to escape without any real sensitivity to the issues raised by the humanities'. He denounces the version of organisation studies that is currently taught in most English-speaking business schools as Heathrow Organisation Theory, since it features in the books for busy executives found in airport bookstores.[16]

If the arguments of Zald, Jacques and Burrell are manifestations of an historic turn, then it could be argued that it is little more than a version of Critical Management Studies, with which Zald, Jacques and Burrell are strongly associated. Jacques and Burrell in particular are advocates of an historical orientation derived from Foucault, the French philosopher-cum-historian whose mere mention attracts the ire of many English-speaking historians.[17] However, as

Zald points out, political commitment is not synonymous with any particular methodological stance.[18] While an historic turn may be congruent with some of the ontological and epistemological positions within Critical Management Studies, it is by no means exclusive to a radical political position.

It is worth noting that one of the reasons Kieser gives for revitalising history in organisation studies is that it can 'teach us to interpret existing organizational structures not as determined by laws, but as the result of decisions in past choice opportunities'.[19] Such arguments against determinism in history are by no means limited to leftists. What is striking if we compare history and organisation studies is that in organisation studies determinism and functionalism appear to be aligned with liberalism,[20] whereas conservative and liberal historians, such as Ferguson, are among the avowed opponents of determinism.[21] An anti-determinist historian notes how ironic it is that 'the very structural and economic determinist arguments which were pooh-poohed by Western advocates when Marxists tried to prove the inexorable logic of the rise of their systems are now trotted out to demonstrate that the triumph of the West was preprogrammed'.[22] It seems no less ironic that determinism is still ascendant in mainstream variants of business school disciplines such as organisation studies.

Deterministic versions of history face increasing scepticism from theoretically inclined historians of various persuasions, who are concerned with the narrative aspects of historical writing. For example, Ferguson has coined the term 'virtual history' to describe counterfactual accounts of how history might have been written differently if certain events had or had not occurred. Virtual history emphasises the role of narrative in capturing chance events and turning points, what historians call contingency in history. According to Ferguson, 'virtual history is a necessary antidote to determinism'.[23] There is also a stream of post-modernism in historical writing that 'is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling presuppositions' and in which it is accepted that it is virtually impossible to 'narrativize without moralizing'.[24] From Critical Management Studies there is continual objection to the use of deterministic analysis 'that masks its ethical stance with the guise of technical neutral rationality and then advances its conclusions as if there were no alternative'.[25] All of this suggests that an historic turn in organisation studies would entail a more reflexive accommodation of narrative and contingency, as proposed by a variety of historical theorists from a range of political positions.

III

According to Burrell, business schools are constrained by 'the 4 Rs of relevance, recency, results and redemption'.[26] Clearly the 4 Rs are inimical to an historic turn. However, the alliterative parody of the 3 Rs need not include recency, since Heathrow Organisation Theory abounds with historical illustrations. Two classics of Heathrow Organisation Theory, which very much defined the genre in the 1980s, should suffice to show the prevalence of history. Peters and Waterman

discuss the historical origins of company philosophies, such as IBM's, although almost their only source is *A Business and Its Beliefs*, a book by Thomas Watson Jr., the founder's son.[27] Deal and Kennedy also place great importance on historical sources. They set out to

> . . . see what had made America's great companies not merely organizations, but successful human institutions. Here we stumbled into a goldmine of evidence. Biographies, speeches, and documents from such giants of business as Thomas Watson of IBM, John Patterson (the founder of NCR), Will Durant of General Motors, William Kellogg of Kelloggs, and a host of others.[28]

Here we have hagiography rather than historiography. There is little or no space in inspirational Heathrow Organisation Theory for any debate, for example, about whether the success of IBM was due to Thomas J. Watson's visionary leadership or the systematic use of anti-competitive practices.[29] As Perrow observed in his classic essay on organisation studies, Heathrow Organisation Theory is replete with anecdotes and 'proverbs' masquerading as 'principles'.[30] History, even ancient history, can provide convenient illustrations in addition to reassuring managers that they have 'wide-ranging minds'.[31] As Jacques observes, even the Bible has been cited as a forerunner of organisation theory textbooks![32]

As a counter to the conservative bias of Heathrow Organisation Theory, it has been suggested that 'the study of history can benefit the modern manager' by debunking erroneous business ideologies.[33] A case can be made that neither management practitioners nor organisation studies academics know very much about the history of management or management thought. For example, the leftist background of major figures such as Kurt Lewin has been written out of organisation studies.[34] But as Kieser explains, any appeal to history as if it were a repository of facts that can be called upon to support or refute one position or another rapidly runs into the difficulty that 'historical material is inexhaustible', and 'a selection cannot be avoided'. Therefore, the 'selection as well as the interpretation of events is always in danger of reflecting the ideologies of the researcher' and 'the results of historical analyses have to be subjected to a critical discourse', as they do from 'any other theoretical approach'.[35]

Rather than being constrained by recency, it would be more accurate to say that Heathrow Organisation Theory usually presents historical narratives in a common-sense, quasi-pluralist form, where the lack of reflexivity regarding rhetoric leaves ideological assumptions unexplored. History is invoked in Heathrow Organisation Theory to support incontrovertible verities. Typically an historical narrative is regarded as the prosaic telling of a story, with the implication that readers can relax their critical, sceptical faculties. This is evident in the 'turnaround' type of analyses, which often give a quick helicopter overview of the past. But voluntaristic surface narratives of this sort are disconnected from any consideration of the degree to which social structures – although hidden –

constrain and shape everyday patterns of action and events. This form of narrative, which is rarely acknowledged as such, fails to take account of the issues raised by social theorists, such as Giddens, who have alerted historians to the need to allow for the antinomies of action and structure without subordinating narrative to theoretical postures.[36] Instead, historical actors' choices are taken to be predetermined by their personalities, instincts and tastes.[37]

As far as business school case study writers are concerned, what they offer are presentations of facts, not opinions.[38] This indicates a prevalence in business schools of what an historical theorist describes as 'historical realism', which is:

> the idea that history exists as determinate, untold story until discovered and told by the historian. Such a position naturally inclines in the direction of a high regard for narrative's epistemic legitimacy. Although seldom explicitly defended, it or something like it is often inveighed against.[39]

To defend such a position would be tantamount to admitting that it is only one among several possible positions, thus undermining its hegemony as common sense. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the more that narrative history is theorised, in line with an historic turn, the less likely it is to be acceptable in Heathrow Organisation Theory,[40] which is predicated upon the conviction that such 'theorising is beyond the manager's interests or capacities, and should stay so'.[41]

If an historic turn entails an engagement with historiographical debates, then one of the most important long-running debates in historiography is the question of whether history is merely a literary or narrative form, designed for political and moral edification, or a science, designed for explanation of the past and prediction of the future.[42] In business schools this is reflected in the dichotomy between the voluntaristic narratives of Heathrow Organisation Theory, which continue to fulfil the requirement for moral edification, and the analytic schemas of organisation studies, which are constrained to speak in 'the provincial ''scientistic'' argot of American academe'.[43] Having established the antipathy of Heathrow Organisation Theory towards the type of theorising that is incumbent upon an historic turn, we now turn to the analytic schemas to examine whether they are any more likely to be amenable to an historic turn.

IV

Business historians, such as Hannah,[44] have long recognised that extreme versions of market selection, such as Alchian's evolutionary theory,[45] leave little scope for historical studies of purposive behaviour in individual firms. Nevertheless, it is claimed that the Coasian-inspired new institutional economics, which has reconciled economic theory with the existence of organisations, can also accommodate history.[46] Unfortunately, the acceptance that temporal or spatial dimensions need to be incorporated into economic explanations for the existence

of organisations does not necessarily require or justify empirical historical research into the origins of organisations. If the logic of history can be explained satisfactorily in theoretical terms, then there is no need to refer to the historical narration of what happened, except for the purposes of illustration. The functional logic of efficiency can be superimposed on to the narratives of historians, as transaction cost logic has been superimposed on to Chandler's[47] account of strategy and structure.[48] Although it should be noted that according to Roy's perceptive critique, Chandler's account of the American industrial corporation is functional, as opposed to historical, since it treats consequences, such as greater efficiency, as causes, and as such is compatible with Williamson's functionalist transaction cost analysis.[49]

Williamson's transaction cost economics is the most prevalent version of new institutional economics in organisation studies. Indeed, for many economists transaction cost economics is probably synonymous with organisation theory. The influence of Williamson's work can hardly be overestimated. By the early 1990s Williamson's *Markets and Hierarchies* and *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism* had surpassed Marx's *Capital* to become the most frequently cited books in the social sciences.[50] However, the sociological and historical objections to economic imperialism apply to transaction cost economics. Economic models are based on rational, self-interested, instrumental behaviour that is derived from a hierarchical set of fixed preferences. The inference of self-interest is tautological and empirically unfalsifiable.[51] Society is treated as an aggregate of atomistic individuals acting within the constraints of their own and others' fixed preferences and existing technology. The aim is for economic models to be applicable in any situation where there is scarcity and choice as defined by the economist, irrespective of local definitions. The market is almost invariably prioritised over the firm, in the sense that markets are assumed to be ubiquitous as well as logically and historically prior to any other forms of co-ordination, as in Williamson's declaration that 'in the beginning there were markets'.[52] Williamson has been widely criticised for his assumption that only efficient forms of organisation prevail.[53] The so-called 'efficiency principle'[54] militates against both historical and ethical considerations. The logic of efficiency is presumed rather than demonstrated by historical analysis.[55] The subordination of history to conceptual modelling is evident in Williamson's assertion that his arguments rely 'on a combination of *a priori* theorizing and related natural selection arguments'.[56] Thus he pronounces that it was 'not by history but by logic' that the owners of capital became the owners of enterprise.[57]

In common with Kieser,[58] historians have drawn attention to the 'questionable interpretation of historical data' in Williamson's account of work organisation.[59] This is a manifestation of economists' preference for 'hypothetical' as opposed to 'actual history',[60] or what McCloskey calls 'stylised settings'. 'Stylised' means: 'I have not checked this in the world or even in the library, and am relying on the imaginary world that I and a few of my friends like to talk about'.[61] Concerning the rise of the capitalist corporation in the United States specifically, Fligstein, an

organisational sociologist, finds it 'difficult to see how economic arguments can account for what happened historically'. His view is that 'the plausibility of economic efficiency stories rests more on their abstract character and ability to round of the edges and provide a pleasing and simple version of what occurred'.[62] A rhetorical response to Fligstein would be for organisational economists to recognise and acknowledge their own rhetoric, as is advocated by McCloskey, who maintains that 'rhetorical self-awareness is consistent with the genuinely neoclassical'.[63] But we see little likelihood of a rhetorical attitude taking hold in organisational economics as it would undermine the pretension that the attribution of efficiency to existing organisational arrangements represents a scientific assessment rather than a political preference. So instead of assessing the rhetoric of organisational economics in relation to history we need to turn our attention to the treatment of history in economic variants of the organisational discourse other than the narrow interpretation of transaction costs. Otherwise we run the risk of presenting a rather biased account.

V

It should be noted that Williamson's version of transaction cost economics represents only one of several broad strands of thought that 'trace their intellectual roots to the Coasian heritage of positive transaction costs'. Hirsch and Lounsbury have highlighted the contrast between differing versions of Coasian-inspired new institutional economics by comparing the work of Williamson with that of North, the Nobel prize-winning economic historian.[64] In contrast to Williamson, North does not presume that history is efficient. In particular North acknowledges that rulers devise property rights 'in their own interests', and transaction costs result in typically inefficient property rights prevailing.[65] He has long recognised the need to take account of the major sources of change in an economy, such as 'technology, population, property rights and government control over re-sources'.[66] All of these are exogenised by Williamson, in common with neoclassical economics.

Hirsch and Lounsbury highlight two major differences between North's institutional economic history and Williamson's transaction costs economics.[67] First, Williamson takes capitalist property rights as given. The Coasian account of property rights is conveniently overlooked. Both Coase and Demsetz have argued that since it is property rights that are traded in markets, the enforcement of property rights is a prerequisite for markets.[68] Demsetz recognises that the basis of property rights is determined by a broad 'set of considerations related to the history, religion, and culture of societies'.[69] The second difference between North and Williamson is that North allows for a 'volitional' aspect in history,[70] which means that organisational change is, at least partially, consciously willed by human actors. It is the outcome, be it intended or unintended, of actors' competing pictures, their 'subjective models', of existing and future situations.[71] Williamson effectively rules out any discussion of conscious choice, since all choices are

assumed to be efficient. Williamson does not depart from the Panglossian belief of neoclassical economics, 'that whatever there is, is there for a reason'.[72] North has explicitly abandoned the view that only efficient institutions prevail, although he retains a view that economic growth is the yardstick by which efficiency can and should be measured.[73]

In theory and research the economist is depicted as a producer of objective scientific results from the perspective of the detached, neutral observer, producing predictions and explanations. But this stance is undermined by the very assumptions that allow for the existence of organisations in transaction cost economics. The distinction between positive and normative judgements, and with it the notion of some positive, non-relative definition of efficiency, is under threat once bounded rationality is admitted. As Nelson and Winter point out, 'one little-recognised consequence of our bounded rationality is that we lack the capability to sharply separate our values form our knowledge'.[74] Efficiency could only be used as neutral criterion for assessing forms of organisation if there was 'virtually complete consensus about needs, wants and values'.[75] Perhaps surprisingly it is Demsetz, who is often cited in support of mainstream organisational economics,[76] who observes that 'The ''great debate'' is not properly about efficiency but about which set of preferences, or perhaps which political weighting of citizen preferences, is most desirable. ''Most desirable,'' of course, constitutes an appeal to standards of a higher order'.[77] It is just such a debate that organisational economics, along with other research programmes in organisation studies, seems designed to avoid. It is a debate that would almost certainly involve a discussion of how history might have been otherwise.

VI

Having introduced Nelson and Winter, we should discuss the influence of evolutionary economics, although we note that the resource-based view of the firm derived from evolutionary economics has been far more influential in strategy than in organisation studies. Evolutionary economics stands as the major alternative approach to Coasian-derived transaction cost economics, or at least it does for economists who are interested in the theory of the firm.[78] Nelson and Winter's Lamarckian version of evolution emphasises the importance of routines within organisations. Routines are the decision rules that explain the regular and predictable behaviour patterns of firms. Innovation represents a change in routine. According to Nelson and Winter's evolutionary analogy, 'routines play the role that genes play in biological evolutionary theory'.[79]

Evolutionary economics provides its own critique of the hazy relation between transaction cost economics and history, as Winter explains:

> At a very basic level, it is not clear whether transaction cost economics aspires to a historico-evolutionary mode of explanation or, instead, to

> something like the timeless, abstract deduction from presumed 'data' that characterizes general equilibrium theory. The frequent use of historical evidence in the transaction cost paradigm is consistent with the former, and not the latter, interpretation of its explanatory program. On this interpretation, transaction cost economics is fully compatible with evolutionary thinking.[80]

We note that this does not go as far as a historian's blunt complaint that Williamson's 'inability to deal with process' reflects his neoclassical roots.[81] Moreover, the tendency to equate evolutionary thinking with historical analysis, as well as the ever more sophisticated discussions of complexity theory and co-evolutionary theory in organisation studies, seem to overlook the longstanding objections to evolutionism in the social sciences. Important social theorists, such as Giddens, have lined up against evolutionism on the grounds of its association with structuralism and functionalism, and its representation of 'history as ''subjectless'' – as occurring ''behind the backs'' of its participants'.[82] Giddens warns that 'evolutionism . . . can easily be an enemy of history rather than the ally it might superficially seem to be'.[83] We also note that although *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm* is revered as a foundation of the resource-based view of the firm,[84] Penrose's critique of Alchian,[85] whose evolutionism is cited by Nelson and Winter as 'a direct intellectual precedent' for their evolutionary economics,[86] is overlooked. Penrose anticipated later sociologists' objections to evolutionism when she argued that: 'The characteristic use of biological analogies in economics is to suggest explanations that do not depend upon the conscious willed decisions of human beings.' She alleged that Alchian used the natural selection analogy 'to provide an explanation of human affairs that does not depend on human motives . . . No matter what men's motives are, the outcome is determined not by the individual participants, but by an environment beyond their control'.[87]

The resource-based view is also associated with the concept of path dependence. A favourite example is David's account of the alleged inefficiency of the QWERTY keyboard.[88] Path dependence underlines the acknowledgement in evolutionary economics that history is not necessarily efficient. Briefly put, path dependence implies that particular choices, usually in relation to technology, can open up, or more usually close down future choices, a process sometimes described as 'lock-in by historical events'.[89] The literature on path dependence is compelling for critics of efficiency theory, although it is worth noting that in the strategy literature the benign benefits of lock-in for a particular firm are emphasised at the expense of inefficiency for wider society, thus depriving path dependence of its critical political subtext.[90] However, we would caution against a wholesale welcome for path dependence as a way to approach history. For a start, it strikes us as yet another permutation of the foundational debate about perfect competition among economists:[91] if there is perfect competition, then the QWERTY keyboard must be the most efficient means of typing (history is assumed to be efficient); but if the QWERTY keyboard is not the most efficient

means of typing then there cannot be perfect competition (history is demonstrably not efficient). Economists and their acolytes in strategy are apt to see any relaxation of the strictest assumptions of neoclassical economics, such as path dependence, as a radical departure,[92] which only goes to show how strong the hegemony of the neoclassical paradigm actually is. Another cause for caution is that path dependence emphasises fundamental turning points, where decisions were made whose implications may not have been realised at the time, after which the situation reverts to something like technological determinism. As with a previous encounter between economics and the muse of history, Fogel's counterfactual argumentation, path dependence does not lead us into a reconstruction of contemporary debates.[93] This downplays a view of history as flux, with continual crises, conflicts and dilemmas within organisations,[94] where it is the historian who chooses the narrative devices of continuity and discontinuity 'for their storytelling virtues'.[95]

VII

We now turn to organisational sociology, where the priority in the normal science paradigm of structural contingency theory is to be synchronous and cross-sectional.[96] Extensive research designs with large populations of organisations are preferred to longitudinal case studies in order to discern the most salient environment contingencies determining organisational structures. The strategic choice perspective proposed by Child provides a corrective to structural contingency to allow for variation between contexts.[97] The most forthright defender of structural contingency theory, Donaldson, remains resistant to the claims of strategic choice, but others have been able to absorb many of the objections raised by strategic choice simply by adding to the list of salient contingencies.[98] Most notably Hickson and Pugh, who founded the most successful contingency research programme, the Aston Group,[99] have accepted Hofstede's argument that while, *ceteris paribus*, organisational structures are determined by universal contingencies, this is mediated by national culture. Hofstede acknowledges that 'in-depth historical study' may be complementary to his 'quantitative cross-national surveys', and he makes many well-informed allusions to history, both ancient and modern, and even prehistory.[100] But it remains doubtful whether allowing organisational structures determined by contingencies to be mediated by context and national cultures qualifies as a major shift towards history in the structural contingency discourse.

New institutionalism and organisational ecology are more historical than the discourse of structural contingency and strategic choice, but both are problematic in relation to an historic turn. Organisational ecologists, who are heavily influenced by biological analogies, have distanced themselves from strict determinism. Hannan and Freeman deny that their ecological analyses are deterministic. They assert that their models 'are formally probabilistic … In no sense do we think that the history of organisational populations is preordained to

unfold in fixed ways'. Even so, they are among the organisation theorists who are most explicitly dismissive of narrative history. From their 'perspective of explaining variability in the organizational world, the motivations and preferences of particular actors probably do not matter very much'.[101] They go on to explain that:

> There is no escaping the antiheroic implications of population ecology. A retrospective analysis of any industry, market, or form of organizing can identify individuals whose actions appear with hindsight to have stood out from their peers. The myths that develop around these people are magnified and romanticized by undisciplined retrospective analysis.[102]

If 'individual managers do not matter much in accounting for variability in organizational properties', then organisational ecologists are hard pressed to say much about how individuals might use their theories to intervene in organisations.[103]

The new institutionalism is aligned with structural contingency theory in allowing for the capacity of organisations to adapt to their environment, whereas organisational ecology emphasises structural inertia within organisations and the importance of selection rather than adaptation. Whether or not ecological and institutional theory are complementary and amenable to synthesis, as leading commentators have suggested,[104] the research programmes of new institutionalism and organisational ecology both differ from structural contingency by favouring longitudinal as opposed to cross-sectional studies of organisational fields and populations. Organisational ecology is noted for its 'use of large-scale, historical databases',[105] and this raises questions concerning the treatment of time in longitudinal organisation studies. The time frame in longitudinal research is usually only a time-line and presumes a simple account of history.[106] The compression or elongation of events over time is methodologically excluded from both institutional and ecological longitudinal research. Events that rupture the relatively enduring patterns of social life are necessarily excluded. Historical time, as opposed to a time-line, is uneven and punctured by events, whereas time is smoothed in longitudinal studies as part of the effort to 'trade-off precision and realism for generality'.[107]

Organisational ecology and new institutionalism have reoriented organisational sociology from cross-sectional research to 'the more advanced study of a smaller number of variables over longer historical time periods'.[108] In the case of new institutionalism, the concept of isomorphism has almost been reduced to the proposition that all organisations are becoming like all others through a process of mimetic isomorphism, that is, organisations imitating each other voluntarily.[109] However, this has been done 'at the expense of understanding the uniqueness of individual organizations' from 'richly contextual case studies of single organizations'.[110] Thus it can be inferred that over-socialised *homo sociologicus* has no more need of narrative history to make sense of his actions than under-

socialised *homo economicus*. This may be an exaggeration, but even as new institutionalists have sought to study institutional change as a corrective to their emphasis on persistence and homogeneity,[111] we detect a definite fear of lapsing into narrative interpretations of historical events that stress their complexity, uniqueness and contingency.[112]

VIII

We need to balance the general antipathy of organisational sociology towards an historic turn with an acknowledgement that there are glimmers of such a turn from particular sociologists who remain within the major discourses of organisation studies. We start with Aldrich, who has attempted to integrate an 'historical framework' into his 'evolutionary' account of organisation studies. This represents an explicit response to authors such as Zald, who 'have called for an historical approach to organisational analysis', and stands as a corrective to the apparent antipathy of organisational ecology towards historical narratives.[113] Aldrich takes as his starting point Abbott's telling observation that 'action and process have largely disappeared from empirical sociology', even though they are 'central to much sociological theory, both classic and recent', action being central to Weber's 'numerous contingent narratives'.[114] Aldrich retains the ecological focus on the history of a particular population of organisations in order to examine organisational change. But his analysis combines age effects, in which '"time" runs on a universal clock, rather than being historically situated', with period effects, which are historical discontinuities that have a similar effect on all organisations within a population. As Aldrich recognises, 'choosing which years constitute a "period" reveals a potential problem with historical analyses, because narrative analysis not only relies on events occurring serially, in a chronology, but also tends to emphasize unique events'.[115] Aldrich accepts that periods are labels that are created with the benefit of hindsight through historiographical debate. Inevitably this leads him into a discussion of the salience of particular events to be selected as the boundary for periods whose effects he wishes to examine. In the process, Aldrich is drawn to Abbott's notion of 'narrative positivism', which is concerned with exposing the implicit assumptions concerning time and temporality within sociological theorising.[116] Perhaps surprisingly, then, we find aspects of an historic turn in Aldrich's evolutionary approach to narrative and periodisation.

The new institutionalists have gone further than organisational ecologists in questioning determinism. They recognise 'the notion that organizations represent independent social actors in modern societal processes', and 'conceive of both organizational and individual actors as potential creators of new institutional structure'.[117] But arguably, while the new institutionalists[118] have introduced the ideas of sociologists such as Bourdieu into organisation studies, their framework renders elites and other powerful social actors irrelevant.[119] Indeed it could be argued that a common feature of both organisational economics and organisa-

tional sociology is the neglect of property rights. Giddens gives a flavour of the implications of taking organisations seriously as actors that are able to effect change in their environment in his outline of structuration: 'The modern capitalist enterprise is in some respects both typical of modern organisations and one of the main sources of innovation generating the circumstances in which they have arisen.'[120]

The new institutionalism in organisation studies is closely associated with the new economic sociology which has countered the advance of economic imperialism. For a long time Chandler's monumental work, *The Visible Hand*, while open to criticism,[121] stood as virtually the only credible empirically researched historical metanarrative of the industrial corporation and American capitalism. But we now have at least three competing metanarratives, namely Fligstein's *The Transformation of Corporate Control*, Roy's *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America* and Prechel's *Big Business and the State*. Fligstein is rooted in the new institutionalist version of organisational sociology, whereas Roy and Prechel are examples of the new economic sociology with a Marxian hue. Each offer multiple methods, from cross-sectional surveys of quantitative data sampled at regular historical intervals through to detailed narrative case studies. These impressive works are welcome in themselves, but the test of whether they contribute towards an historic turn will be the extent to which they generate historiographical debate in organisation studies beyond a few glowing book reviews.

IX

The burgeoning interest in organisational culture and symbolism promised to make organisation studies more historical and to provide theoretical relevance for historians.[122] It is generally acknowledged that organisational cultures are '*historically based'*, which means that they 'cannot be divorced from their histories and they do not arise overnight'.[123] However, organisational research informed by the concepts of culture and symbolism is often ahistorical. Qualitative researchers were excited by 'the renaissance of interest in organizational culture' because it signalled that 'ethnographic research would have a home in organisational studies and qualitative case studies would be appreciated for their richly detailed, context-specific insights'.[124] But some ethnographic organisational culture researchers have virtually ruled out historical research. In the same way that organisational ecologists dismiss what they see as undisciplined historical writing, cultural scholars are often keen to distance themselves from the 'founder-centred' narratives that feature in Heathrow Organisation Theory.[125]

The objection to founder-centred narratives extends to a virtual denial that it is possible to reconstruct a narrative history of an organisation.[126] A leading culture researcher claims to write in a way that 'avoids narrative structure and other forms of textual seduction'.[127] Organisational culture studies could be said to share what

historians have described as the 'impositionalist' objection to narrative history, which is 'that recounting the past in the form of a story inevitably imposes a false narrative structure upon it'. This leads to 'the unhappy (and contrary to experience) skeptical conclusion that narratives cannot be true'.[128] The history of an organisational culture is seen as consisting of 'historical residues' that can be uncovered by a 'thorough examination of a culture' in the present.[129] This is supported by the 'strong belief' among ethnographers 'that it is possible to analyze groups from an ahistorical perspective. The history that counts is, according to this view, embedded in the daily practices and symbolic life of the group studied and hence will be taken into account naturally'.[130] The methodological preference for ethnography and in-depth, qualitative interviewing militates against history. In case studies history is often neglected in order to disguise the identity of organisations.[131] Revealing the unique narrative history of an organisation would jeopardise the anonymity that is frequently promised to informants.[132] It would also undermine the tendency to generalise from ethnographies. An anonymous actor can be presented as typical and 'timeless' rather than 'a character of some particular historically situated organizational and occupational world existing at the time of the study'.[133] It is claimed that an organisation presented by an ethnographer 'may not exist, and yet everything that is said about it may be true … that is, it may be credible in the light of other texts' concerning similar organisations.[134] Such fictionalisation runs counter to historians' 'commitment to maximum verisimilitude' through 'citation to the records of the past'.[135] Cultural scholars have also played a leading role in introducing a version of post-modernism into organisation studies that reinforces the 'impositionalist' objection to history. Foucault, who turned to history but continued the structuralist aversion to narrative history, heavily influences the post-structuralist variety of post-modernism that finds favour in organisation studies.[136]

X

Not all organisational culture researchers have been inhibited from conducting historical investigations. Pettigrew's impressive body of work is noted in both organisational culture studies and business history for its combined use of documentary historical sources and interviews.[137] Pettigrew's work has been likened to Chandler's as an exemplar of a narrative strategy for dealing with process data in organisation studies.[138] However, while each is obviously accomplished in its own terms, a detailed textual analysis of *Strategy and Structure* and *The Awakening Giant* reveals that they are very different in their treatment of history.[139] Chandler presents separate coherent historical narratives for four firms, whereas Pettigrew repeatedly goes over the same period in successive chapters dealing with different aspects of the same company. Most of Pettigrew's book is based on real-time research in the recent past with occasional forays into the archive for more distant events. This is not to denigrate the

importance of Pettigrew's attention to process. But we note that as the study of strategy has paid more attention to process, the impositionalist objection to historical narrative has surfaced, as in the following advice:

> Most studies of strategy process to date have been retrospective case histories conducted after the outcomes were known. However, it is widely recognized that prior knowledge of the success or failure of a strategic change effort invariably biases a study's findings. While historical analysis is necessary for examining many questions and concerted efforts can be undertaken to minimize bias, it is generally better, if possible, to initiate historical study before the outcomes of a strategic change process become known.[140]

Another offshoot of organisational culture is the increasing attention to narrative, which threatens to challenge the unreflective scientistic style of organisation studies. Czarniawska is concerned with facilitating a conversation between organisation studies and literary criticism, highlighting the character of organisation theory as a literary genre.[141] Boje, on the other hand, builds on his historical deconstruction of the Disney corporate culture, and makes extensive reference to philosophers of history such as McCloskey, Ricoeur and White, who we feel are likely to feature much more if an historic turn gathers momentum in organisation studies.[142]

XI

We have argued that the calls for more history, or for different approaches to history, from leading organisation theorists can be interpreted as calls for what we describe as an historic turn. Such an historic turn would entail questioning the scientistic 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. However, we maintain that both the voluntaristic narratives of Heathrow Organisation Theory and the scientistic analytic schemas of organisation studies are resistant to an historic turn. The pseudo-pedagogical and inspirational quality of hagiographic narratives in Heathrow Organisation Theory would be undermined if they were compelled to reveal the partiality of their own discourse. The ready-made lessons to be learned from history would become historiographical questions to be debated, and this might weaken the authoritarian impulse to act rather than think which Heathrow Organisation Theory reinforces. When we turn to the analytic schemas of the major discourses in organisational economics, organisational sociology and organisational culture, we find that even as history is accommodated through evolutionary economics and path dependence, new institutionalism and organisational ecology, and the attention to process in culture and strategy, a

general suspicion towards historical narrative is revealed that militates against an historic turn.

The situation in organisation studies is nicely captured by Abbott's comment on empirical practise of sociology in general:

> Our normal methods parse social reality into fixed entities with variable qualities. They attribute causality to the variables – hypostatized social characteristics – rather than to agents; variables do things, not social actors. Stories disappear. The only narratives present in such methods are just-so stories justifying this or that relation between the variables. Contingent narrative is impossible.[143]

In organisation studies, Heathrow Organisation Theory presents the easily digestible Just-So stories for management practitioners, albeit that lifting the stories from history gives them an intellectual flavour, while the analytic schemas assure the academy that the relations between the variables have been rigorously tested. By contrast, we contend that an historic turn opens the way for diverse forms of theoretically informed historical writing in organisation studies. We would dissociate the call for an historic turn in organisation studies from the appeal for management academics and practitioners to be in command of a selected body of historical facts. Neither is it our intention to license a retreat into chronicling where and when events occurred in the exacting manner of antiquarian historians. Indicative of the variety we would include in an historic turn is Jacques' Foucauldian history of the employee.[144] Then there is Burrell's excursion into *Pandemonium*, which eschews the aura of realism and objectivity that is normally found in history, but nevertheless presents organisation studies with an invitation to an odd and occasionally disturbing set of historiographical debates, from witchcraft to the Holocaust. More conventionally, the competing metanarratives of American capitalism from Chandler, Fligstein, Roy and Prechel provide ample opportunity for further metahistorical reflection and historiographical debate.[145] These reflect longstanding historiographical concerns with the viability of the industrial corporation in advanced capitalist economies, and the power that such corporations wield, which resonate with contemporary debates around globalisation.[146]

NOTES

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