

Organization Studies

Call for Papers

Special Issue on

Uses of the Past: History and Memory in Organizations and Organizing

Guest Editors

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Historical approaches to management and organization research have been flourishing in recent years, following decades when it was seen as marginal to the field (Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014). The development has been characterized by plurality in both the conceptualization of organizations in historical time (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014) and in how history is researched (Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014).

One historical approach that has attracted the attention of both organization researchers (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993; Ericson, 2006; Suddaby, et al, 2010; Foster, et al, 2011; Anteby and Molnar, 2013) and business historians (Hansen, 2006, 2007, 2012a; Mordhorst, 2008, 2014; Kroeze and Keulen, 2013) is what could be called “uses of the past” by managers, organizations, and industries. Such a perspective takes history as “constitutive” (Wadhvani and Bucheli, 2014) in shaping how actors define their own sense of self and action in time, and in emphasizing how their interpretation of the past shape their experience in the present and their expectations for the future (Kosseleck, 2004). Research of this type has examined how actors have interpreted the past to forge organizational identities (Gioia, et al, 2000; Hansen, 2007; Anteby and Molnar, 2013; Mordhorst, 2014), consolidate social memory (Rowlinson, et al 2010), set strategic direction (Suddaby, et al, 2010; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), understand entrepreneurial opportunities (Popp and Holt, 2013a, 2013b), redefine market categories (Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010), shape understandings of products (Hansen, 2006, 2010), and establish new industries (Kirsch, et al, 2014). It thus suggests the tremendous variety in how, why and with what consequences the past might be used in organizations and organizing.

The emergence of “uses of the past” perspectives represents an important new direction in how history and historical reasoning is integrated into management and organization studies. Previous organizational research and theory, even when it took history seriously, typically understood an organization’s history (Nelson and Winter, 1982) and the histories of industries or populations of firms (Hannan and Freeman, 1984) as “given” by their path through time. History was synonymous with the past, and thus understood as immutable, whether the goal of research was to identify a normative evolutionary process (Nelson and Winter, 1982) or a path-dependent one (North, 1990). In contrast, the “uses of the past” approach emphasizes not only the malleability of interpretations of the past, but also of its relationship to how organizational actors experience the present and set expectations for the future. The past is thus understood as a reservoir for different uses. History and memory become fields where all actors are

simultaneously users and producers of interpretations and of historical consciousness. And organizations are understood as arenas for this ongoing struggle to establish historical identity and consciousness, as well as products of this struggle (Nora, 1990). The approach thus opens the possibility for a range of new research on the various ways, and circumstances under which, the past is used.

“Uses of the past” approaches do not only hold the promise of providing management and organizational researchers a novel lens from which to understand a range of phenomena related to organizations and organizing; it also suggests possibilities for re-thinking how the endeavour of academic history itself is conceived and written. Since its professionalization in the nineteenth century, academic history has been oriented to the study of the past in and for itself, a focus that remains a central and legitimate endeavour for the kind of the scholarly histories produced in history departments. As Leopold von Ranke (1824) put it, the purpose of scholarly history was not to “judg[e] the past for the benefit of future generations ... it merely seeks to show the past as it once was (Ranke, 1824).” While most modern historians reject Rankean scientism, they still embrace Rankean professional norms in seeking to understand and represent actors and actions in the past “on their own terms.” The “uses of the past” approach, on the other hand, suggests that there is room for an alternative perspective on the study of the past, one that lies beyond the domain of professional history. The focus of this alternative perspective is on how the past is interpreted in the present, and the functions and uses of the past for purposes outside its own realm. Such an understanding of the past in many ways predates modern academic history and reflects the ancient tradition of *historia magistra vitae* – history as life’s teacher (Kosselleck, 2004). Such an approach emphasizes history’s value or use by actors to understand the present and set expectations for the future, rather than one based on history as a body of professional knowledge. It also shifts the emphasis of scholarship to the analysis of how actors interpret the past – an approach that may be more appropriate for academic research in organization studies than the approaches to history in history departments.

Although “uses of the past” approaches hold great promise in organization studies, much about these approaches remains unexplored. Thus, we invite submissions that will help further develop the uses of the past as a novel set of approaches to integrating history into management and organization studies. Questions and issues that require further elaboration include:

1. What constrains or enables actors in their use of past? In other words, what are the contexts in which history is usable and used?
2. How do we account for the interactions between uses of the past at the organization level with those at the individual, social or national levels?
3. What are the variety of uses for which the past has been deployed in organizations and organizing, and what are the relationships between these? Scholars have already begun to examine the uses of history in strategy, marketing, organization identity formation, and market category creation. Are there other major uses of the past that remain unexplored? Does the way in which history is used differ depending on its intended use?
4. Who are the producers and users of history and for what purposes are they producing history?
5. When is it important to create forgetting, oblivion, and back-grounding?
6. Under what circumstances does history create inertia or novelty?

7. How are the relationships between past, present and future constructed and maintained?
8. What are the ways in which organizations become sites of memory? How are organizations, museums, and other sites of memory created and maintained?
9. How and why are the material bases of history and memory maintained in and around organizations?
10. What specialized roles develop to support the uses of history in different organizational contexts? How are specialized actors – archivists, historians, the media – deployed and what is their relationship to organizational management?

Submission Procedure

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All papers will be double-blindly reviewed following the journal's normal review process and criteria. Any accepted papers that will not be included in the Special Issue will be published in an ordinary issue at a later point in time.

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