



History as Organizing: Uses of the Past in Organization Studies

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R. Daniel Wadhvani

University of the Pacific, USA

Roy Suddaby

University of Victoria, Canada

Mads Mordhorst

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Andrew Popp

University of Baltimore, USA

Abstract

Research on the “uses of the past” in organizations and organizing is flourishing. This introduction reviews this approach to integrating history into organization studies and explores its paths forward. We begin by examining the intellectual origins of the approach and by defining why and how it matters to the study of management and organizations. Specifically, we emphasize the performative role of history in making and unmaking organizational orders. Next, we elaborate on how the articles in the special issue demonstrate the uses of the past in shaping organizational identity, strategy, and power. We also highlight how this work contributes to our understanding of the socially embedded character of history in organizations by accounting for the role of materiality, intertextuality, competing narratives, practices, and audiences in how the past is used. We conclude by considering four research frontiers particularly worthy of further exploration—the influence of temporal form, the role of non-rational knowledge, the range of methods, and the integration of ethics—in studies of the uses of the past in organizations.

Keywords

historical consciousness, history, rhetorical history, social memory, temporality, uses of the past

Corresponding author:

Dan Wadhvani, University of the Pacific, 3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95211, USA.

Email: [dwadhvani@pacific.edu](mailto:dwadhwani@pacific.edu)

Uses of the Past

Historical approaches to management and organization research have been flourishing in recent years, following decades when they were seen as marginal to the field. The development has been characterized by plurality in both the conceptualization of organizations in historical time (Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014) and in how history is researched (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014). One approach that has received particular attention focuses on how the past is used in business organizations (Suddaby, Foster & Quinn Trank, 2010).

The study of how the past is used for managerial purposes draws together threads of organizational research from management scholars (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Ericson, 2006; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993) and business historians (Hansen, 2012; Kroeze & Keulen, 2013; Mordhorst, 2008, 2014) that examine the powerful role history plays in broader processes of epistemological and ontological “knowing” in organizations and organizing. The approach, termed “historical consciousness” (Seixas, 2004; Suddaby, 2016), takes history as constitutive (Wadhvani & 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 shapes their experience in the present, their expectations for the future, and the choices they make (Koselleck, 2004). Whereas other approaches to history in organizational research typically involve the use of historical methods and evidence as valuable ways for scholars to learn from and theorize about organizations and organizing in the past (e.g., Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014), the “uses of the past” approach examines how organizational actors themselves produce and use history for purposes in the present.

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 and the histories of industries or populations of firms (Hannan & 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 & 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 their relationship to how organizational actors experience the present and set expectations for the future. The past thus is understood as a source of social symbolic resources available for a wide variety of creative uses. History and memory become fields where all actors are simultaneously producers and consumers of interpretations of the past. Increasingly organizations play a critical role in the ongoing struggle for competing uses of the past. Not only are organizations treated as critical sites for the production and consumption of memory (Nora, 1996), they are also actors engaged in using history for their own interests (Weindruch, 2016).

The approach opens up the possibility for a range of new research on the various ways in which the past is used in organizations and organizing, an agenda that this essay and the special issue it introduces survey. We begin by describing the intellectual origins of the uses of the past perspective and outlining the reasons it matters for the study of organizations and organizing broadly. Specifically, we emphasize the performative role of history in making and unmaking organizational orders. Next, we highlight how the special issue extends and deepens this stream of research, both empirically and conceptually, by documenting the range of purposes for which history is deployed in organizations and by exploring the socially embedded character of these interpretive processes. Finally, we outline a set of topics for future research that we see at the frontier of the conversation on the uses of the past in organizing.

Back to the Future

While the scholarship on the “uses of the past” represents a new direction in contemporary historical research in organization studies, the approach itself is not new. Indeed, the premise that

historical knowledge is valuable and usable for decisions in the present characterized the emergence of history as a recognizable form of knowledge in the first place. In its origins in ancient Greek and Rome, history was seen as a form of practice-oriented knowledge used for present purposes (Koselleck, 2004). Cicero's *De Oratore* characterized it as *historia magistra vitae*—history as life's teacher (Cicero, 1860). History was considered “useful” because the past offered a reservoir of cases and examples that served as analogies pertinent to problems in the present, an understanding that persisted through the medieval and Renaissance periods. Those leaders with knowledge of historical events and figures could draw on these analogies as a guide for decision-making in the present. From this perspective, history was understood not primarily as a representation of the past, but rather as a rhetorical and didactical tool that provided relevant, useful, and applicable plots and morals that could serve strategic purposes in the present (Grethlein, 2011; Rösen, 1987; Mordhorst & Schwarzkopf, 2017).

It was only with the professionalization of history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that academic history became oriented toward the study of the past in and for itself, a focus that remains a central and legitimate endeavor for scholarly history today. Responding to the intellectual claims proffered by Enlightenment thinkers, modern academic history developed around the argument that scholarly history involved the study of the past for its uniqueness rather than for universal or present-oriented purposes (Novick, 1988). 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” (von Ranke, 1824). While most modern academic historians reject Rankean scientism, they often still embrace Rankean professional norms in seeking to understand and represent actors and actions in the past “on their own terms.”

One of the most biting and enduring critics of this view was Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” (1876) accused academic history of neglecting the role of history in living life in the present. Nietzsche instead articulated three varieties of uses of past in the present: monumental, antiquarian, and critical. With that Nietzsche paved the road for a return to the study of how everyday actors—and not just scholars—“use” history in the present and subsequently for the emergence of intellectual claims about the phenomenological and linguistic character of historical knowledge.

A number of intellectual traditions in twentieth-century epistemological and ontological thought began to explore the ways in which historical consciousness was central to how human beings experienced the world and drew scholarly attention back to the relationship between past and present in shaping understandings of everyday experience (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 2008 [1927]; Koselleck, 2004; Mead, 1932). The linguistic turn further deepened scholarly appreciation of the interpretive and agentic aspects of historical knowledge by pointing to the representational character of history (Danto, 1965; White, 1966, 1973). These intellectual developments brought the focus back to the role of “the present” in the formation of historical knowledge and re-expanded the scope of history from a specific kind of scholarly knowledge to a broad form of everyday knowing. Unlike in the ancient world, however, the “uses of the past” in modern thought focused less on history as a didactical tool and more on its role in the human epistemological and ontological construction of the world.

Within the discipline of history, a growing body of scholarship has considered how historical representations organize everyday social, political, and economic life, both in the present and the past. Some of this work emphasized the interpretive—or even “invented”—nature of history, and the role of these traditions in shaping group identities (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). But, even more significantly, the growing scholarly interest in the constitutive character of historical knowledge shaped the critical examination of who such forms of knowledge represented and who it left out (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994), as well as the implications of how such historical representations shaped perceptions,

legitimacy, and power in the present (Foucault, 1972; Said, 1978; Wolf, 1982). These critiques prompted the growth of historical scholarship on people and nations whose historical voices had been previously marginalized. It also led to a robust body of scholarship that examined places and practices in which public memory and history entered the everyday life of ordinary people (Nora, 1996). Business historians too became increasingly interested in how historical narratives shaped identity and understanding in markets and organizations (Hansen, 2012a, 2018), and how conflicts and disagreements over representations shaped and constrained strategy (Mordhorst, 2014).

Organization scholars working in the social constructivist tradition (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) have also elaborated on the “uses of the past” approach as a way of integrating history into organization theory. This work has pointed to the value of history as a cultural or knowledge resource available to organizations, and has emphasized the way in which the interpretive character of history may provide managers agency in how historical knowledge is used to achieve goals in the present (Suddaby et al., 2010). Whereas historians have tended to examine the broader contexts in which historical representations organize actors, their interests, and their struggles, management scholars have tended to focus on the micro-foundational processes and temporal structures by which history is used in organizations, including the types of artefacts used to recall the past (Schultz & Hernes, 2013) and the processes by which organizations recover, use, and forget their history (Anteby & Molnár, 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi, Rindova, & Stigliani, forthcoming; Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993), research that is seen as particularly closely aligned with social memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992 [1925]) and process research on organizations (Hernes, 2014).

In bringing together these distinct intellectual threads and traditions, this special issue creates a robust interdisciplinary forum for re-examining the fundamental questions of why and how the uses of the past matter in organizations and organizing, as well as how to continue to develop this emerging stream of research. We begin that project by clarifying key constructs and assumptions of the conversation.

The Performativity of History: Definitions, Assumptions, Implications

The term “history” can be deceptively slippery. In general use, it sometimes refers to the past and, at other times, to our claims to knowledge about the past. The recent emergence of a historical consciousness in organizations studies (Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Suddaby, 2016) has hinged on distinguishing between these two usages (Durepos and Mills, 2012). Because of the profound implications for each use, in this article and throughout the papers that comprise this special issue, we adopt a clear distinction between “the past” and “history.” We refer to the past as all events that occur chronologically before the present, independent of our knowledge of a particular event. We define history, by contrast, as the mobilization of the past in the present. History, therefore, can be thought of as the various ways of *making the past present*. In contrast to the assumed objectivity of the past, history is a uniquely humanist form of knowledge that continually integrates facts about the past with the values, desires, and interpretive processes of actors in the present.

Building on this distinction, history can be seen as inherently performative. From a phenomenological perspective, an actor’s interpretation of the past shapes how they experience the present, the expectations they have of the future, the choices they make, and the actions they take; as Koselleck (2004) put it, history acts as the nexus between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectations.” Seen as a speech act, history holds the capacity to consummate action (Austin, 1962; Zundel, Holt, & Popp, 2016). Historical narratives bring into being the relationships they describe. One’s gender, as Butler (1986, p. 40) observes, is not an essentialist fact of nature, but

rather is a subtle but distinct historical strategy in which one chooses “a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms.” Because of this, it is important to avoid essentializing history as an objective view of the past but, rather, to see it as an interpretive process involving the interpenetration of objective facts and contemporary values (Gadamer, 1960). By adopting a view of history as performative we begin to see history as an ongoing set of practices through which the past is used to help actors make sense of the present and imagine the future. The performativity of history draws attention to the ways in which the everyday use of history—sometimes consciously and reflexively but often habitually and unconsciously—makes a particular view of the past true by embedding it in collective memory as fact.

The performativity of history—i.e., “history work”—is not limited to the professional representations of the past produced by historians. Rather the production and dissemination of history occurs across a broad range of actors, both individual—i.e., historians, curators, archivists—and collective—i.e., museums, historical societies, media (the History Channel, *National Geographic*), historical re-enactment groups, corporations and nation states. History is performed in a wide variety of mnemonic communities (Zerubavel, 2012) that constitute a diverse array of mnemonic fields (Coraiola, Suddaby, & Foster, 2018). Seen in this way, the performance of history is integral to how any actor navigates their world and academic history emerges only secondarily as involving a reflexive and professionalized set of practices by which scholars interpret and use the past in the present (Carr, 1991).

History makes social orders. Shared interpretations and understandings of the past form the basis for “imagined communities” of all sorts because they shape the common knowledge through which the present is experienced and the future perceived. The role of history in the organization of mnemonic communities has been most extensively studied in the context of the formation of modern nations (Anderson, 1983), and to a lesser extent of social groups (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). But contemporary work in organizations has increasingly emphasized the performative role of history for organizing fields (Coraiola et al., 2018; Wadhvani, 2018), categories (Hansen, 2018; Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010), and organizations (Anteby & Molnár, 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., forthcoming).

Why Organizations Use History

The performativity of history is acutely apparent in organizations. While it is perhaps not recognized as such, a variety of organizational scholars, working in a range of paradigms, have implicitly or explicitly described how history-work performs a number of basic tasks in organizations. Research of this type has examined how actors have interpreted the past to forge organizational identities (Mordhorst, 2014; Ravasi et al., forthcoming; Suddaby & Foster, 2016), consolidate social memory (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010), set strategic direction (Schultz & Hernes, 2013), understand entrepreneurial opportunities (Popp & Holt, 2013a, 2013b), redefine market categories (Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010), shape understandings of products (Hansen, 2006, 2010), establish new industries (Kirsch, 2000), forge social movements (Wadhvani, 2018), define generational experiences (Lippmann and Aldrich, 2014), and manage the perception of change (Dalpiaz & di Stefano, 2018; Suddaby & Foster, 2017). It thus suggests the tremendous variety in how, why, and with what consequences the past might be used in organizations and organizing.

The papers that comprise our special issue exemplify and extend these nascent observations of how history is performed in organizations. Our submissions reflect and elaborate the ways in which organizations interpret the past and use history in three key organizational processes: to create and manage identity and identification, to create and manage strategic change and to create and manage power dependencies. We elaborate on each of these uses of the past in the balance of this section.

Identity and identification

Organizational identification, or the perceived affiliation, oneness, and belonging that an individual acquires with an organization, is a historical process that unfolds over time (Suddaby et al., 2010). As Benedict Anderson (1991) observed, history produces an “imagined community,” distinguishing who belongs and who does not by locating the sense of belonging in the experience of a common past. Anderson’s focal “imagined community” was the nation-state and his critical insight is that nations are socially constructed communities that often override ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences to construct a common identity based on an assumed history. Perceptions of a common identity are often predicated on what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) termed “invented traditions.” By “invention” the authors refer to deceptive or purposely inaccurate representations of the past designed to make certain communities, typically nation-states, appear natural, more grounded in a teleological past, and much older than they actually are. Governments have been particularly effective at using techniques of invented tradition and imagined communities to create a powerful sense of loyalty among their citizens to weave together a set of constructs—nation, territory, citizen, nationalism—that produce such a compelling sense of identity that individuals willingly sacrifice their property and lives for the preservation of a socially constructed community.

Organizations are also “imagined communities” that use “invented traditions” to build identity. Recent empirical research has reinforced the powerful role of history in processes of identification. Walsh and Glynn (2008) introduce the term organizational legacy to describe how employees of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) so strongly identified with their company that they maintained many of the informal traditions long after the company ceased to exist. By ritual storytelling, the employees drew from central identity elements of their shared past to keep their strong sense of communal belonging alive.

Anteby and Molnár (2012), by contrast, demonstrate how the management of a French aeronautical firm engaged in strategic forgetting in order to construct a coherent organizational identity that mapped onto the employee’s sense of French national identity by systematically and conveniently excising elements of their historical collaboration with American firms. Ybema’s (2014) study of a Dutch company, which survived by strategically shifting from a politically motivated newspaper to one more focused on popular culture, describes how the firm reconstructed their imagined history through “temporal discontinuity” talk to alter the firm’s traditional “missionary” identity to a “open and newsy” one.

Although each of the papers that form this special issue speak to some degree to the issue of how the past is used to construct organizational identity, two papers directly address how organizations use the past to manage identity. In the first, “Invoking Alphonse: The founder figure as a historical resource for organizational identity work,” Basque and Langley (2018) describe the process by which the memory of the founder of a financial cooperative was invoked by executives to engage in organizational identity work over a period of eighty years. The authors identify five methods by which executives in the present spoke through the founder—a strategy of historical ventriloquism—in order to articulate, stretch, preserve or refresh expressions of organizational identity. Collectively, the founder invocations serve a dual purpose. Not only do they allow managers in the present to justify and legitimate action in the present, they also serve to enhance the mythology of the founder, further elevating his symbolic power within the organization. Basque and Langley (2018) elaborate on our understanding of processes of identification—i.e., how the past is used to create internal social cohesion through symbolic acts of re-membering (Suddaby et al., 2016).

The second paper that analyzes how the past is used to construct organizational identity is “History as a Source of Organizational Identity Creation” in which Oertel and Thommes (2018)

describe the use of history in self-representations of a regional cluster of twelve watch-making firms located in the Saxonian region of Germany. The authors divide the firms into three groups; mature firms founded in the region in the early nineteenth century and with continuity of family ownership, GDR rooted firms which were also founded in the region in the early nineteenth century but which were subsequently sold to non-family owners, and new firms that relocated relatively recently to the region.

The analysis demonstrates considerable variation in how each of these groups use history to craft their identity. The new firms leaned heavily on using the history of the region, rather than their own firm history, in their online promotions. More interestingly, two of the new firms refer to founders who had no actual link with the firms. Mature firms leaned heavily on their firm history, particularly founder stories, rather than the regional history. And the GDR rooted firms typically did not disclose much about their firm history at all. Collectively the firms demonstrate a wide range of experimental variation as they each adopt different vocabularies of the past as they create their individual identity narratives. In contrast to the Basque and Langley (2018) study, which demonstrates the malleability of a single source of history over time, this study illustrates how history can also be a multi-level resource that can be constructed from historical resources that exist at the individual (founder), organizational, and field (or regional) level of analysis. In processes of identity creation, history is a highly fungible resource that, when used skillfully, can be utilized to fashion *identity spillovers* between organizations or from one cluster of organizations to another.

Strategic change

Organizational scholars are beginning to systematically analyze how history is used to manage processes of strategic change (Suddaby & Foster, 2017). Studies have shown how historical narratives legitimate novelty by making it cognitively familiar and therefore less risky. Hargadon and Douglas (2001), for example, observe how historically familiar designs can facilitate the adoption of new technology—i.e., the electric light—by making it seem continuous with prior technology. Others have demonstrated how history can be used to disrupt existing organizational arrangements. Wadhvani (2018), for example, shows how new interpretations of economic history formed the basis for the social movement that delegitimized the Poor Laws of the nineteenth century and created the foundations of new social institutions for alleviating poverty. Another stream of research demonstrates how a strategic narration of history can be used to create new product and competitive categories in furniture design (Hansen, 2006, 2018), Indian art (Khair & Wadhvani, 2010), and fast food (Boje, Haley, & Saylor, 2016; Foster et al., 2011). Smith and Simeonie (2017) examine the emergence of the self-conscious use of history as a strategic asset at Hudson's Bay Company.

Each of these studies provide an empirical illustration of rhetorical history. Defined as “the strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm” (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 157), rhetorical history draws attention to how the narration of history has been used strategically by organizations to facilitate processes of change. The construct is premised on the observation that strategic adaptation is based on how well a firm is able to conceptualize and act on demands to change imposed by the competitive environment. Variations in how we conceptualize change, in turn, “are underpinned by different assumptions about history and its relationship to our capacity for change” (Suddaby & Foster, 2017). When history is used to characterize the past as fixed and immutable, the agency for change is seen as limited or “path dependent” (David, 2005). When history is used to characterize the past as open to reconstruction, however, agency for change is high and organizational actors employ a variety of strategies—periodization, memorialization,

and strategic forgetting—to encourage the subjective perception of continuity or discontinuity with the past in order to promote a particular version of organizational change.

Again, each of our papers demonstrates how the past is reconstructed in order to facilitate or inhibit strategic change. Two papers, however, focus explicitly on the causal relationship between history and adaptation. In the first, “Intertextuality, Rhetorical History and the Uses of the Past in Organizational Transition” Maclean, Harvey, Sillince and Golant (2018) introduce intertextuality as a unique form of historical rhetoric used to transform Procter & Gamble (P&G) from a multinational to a truly global business enterprise. The authors demonstrate how, in order to facilitate the transition to a globalized firm, P&G engaged in linguistic practices that anchored the organization’s history to its ongoing and future prosperity by mythologizing selective elements of the firm’s past. The myths were strategically repeated and reinforced across a range of texts generated by the company in order to enable change while appearing to stay the same.

In the second paper, “The Career of a Catalogue: Organizational Memory, Materiality and the Dual Nature of the Past at the British Museum,” Blagoev, Felten, and Kahn (2018) extend our understanding of rhetorical history to encompass not only the skillful use of language to facilitate strategic change, but also the strategic use of material objects and the material technologies of memory in processes of facilitating strategic change. Blagoev et al. (2018) analyze the process of digitization of artefacts in the British Museum and demonstrate both the critical importance of physical objects in processes of constructing organizational memory and in processes of using history as a form of rhetorical persuasion. The study also focuses our attention on the interaction between technology and social practices in processes of constructing organizational memory. Materiality, the visual, tactile, and olfactory elements of archives, thus, is an important but largely understudied element of the persuasive use of the past.

Dependencies of power

It is commonly understood that the ability to control the narrative of history confers power on the narrator. This was George Orwell’s observation in his now famous aphorism “Who controls the past controls the future ... who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 1949, p. 32). The understanding of how power becomes embedded in academic history is reflected in Charles Beard’s classical response to Theodore Clarke Smith’s 1933 presidential address to the American Historical Association, in which Smith proclaimed objectivity to be the “noble dream” of the professional academic historian. Beard (1935, p. 83) responded that history was not a science but an act of interpretation and, despite the aspiration of objectivity, the academic historian “remains human, a creature of time, place, circumstance, interests, predilections, [and] culture,” all of which conspired to erode the noble dream. Within academic history, the challenge to objectivity erupted in large part based on the critique that who wrote history and whose history was told had strong implications for who was ascribed power and who was seen as invisible and powerless. Beginning in the 1960s, this critique of power spurred the proliferation of a number of new fields—gendered history, post-colonial history, history of race, etc.—each of which sought to both critique the dominant narratives produced by powerful actors and produce histories that represented previously marginalized people (Appleby et al., 1994; Lerner, 1982; Novick, 1988; Said, 1978; Wolf, 1982). Business and labor historians, too, paid considerable attention to issues of power in their accounts of the histories of firms, industries, and economies, more extensively incorporating less-powerful actors and foregrounding conflict and struggle in narratives of change over time (Licht, 1983; Thompson, 1966), but with relatively little attention to how actors used the past in these struggles.

Management scholars have a long-held understanding of organizations as historical accretions of power (Clegg, 1981; Selznick, 1996; Stinchcombe, 1965). Research has demonstrated how history can be used to claim power through *legitimacy*—i.e., by legitimating a new organizational form (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), a new product (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001), and a new market or industry (Navis & Glynn, 2010). Similarly, related research has shown how history has been used to claim market power by bolstering claims of *authenticity* in the context of heritage brands (Beverland, 2005), tourism (Halewood & Hannam, 2001; Waitt, 2000), music (Peterson, 2005), and food (Lu & Fine, 1995).

Arguably the most influential view of history/power relations in management scholarship, however, has been reflected in the application of Michel Foucault's theories of the archaeology of knowledge to organizations (Burrell, 1988; McKinley & Starkey, 1998). Foucault, in a sense, transferred the locus of power in history from the narrator to the historical discourse, and hence opened up possibilities for more complex and nuanced ways to analyze power and how it is wielded through history. But, as some organizational theorists (Suddaby, 2016) and business historians (Fear, 2001) have observed, the potential contribution that historians might make to the study of organizational power has not been fully realized, in part because of historians' tendency to eschew theory in favor of empirical observation (Fear, 2001).

Two contributions to this special issue, however, begin to bridge this gap by demonstrating how historical analyses can provide an understanding of how power is expressed in organizations. In the first, "From 'History as Told' to 'History as Experienced': Contextualizing the uses of the past," Lubinski (2018) demonstrates how politically motivated struggles to define the historical context contribute to the construction of organizational reality. Based on a historical analysis of German business organizations' efforts to build affiliation with colonial India during the interwar period, Lubinski (2018) demonstrates how such historical claims must be moderated by legitimation with multiple audiences and, as a result, can be critiqued, contradicted, and revised. While history is narrated, the study shows, the more this history is made plausible in practice and through negotiations with audiences, the more likely it is to be accepted.

In the second paper, "'Do not expect me to stay quiet': Challenges in managing a historical strategic resource," Cailluet, Gorge, and Özçaglar-Toulouse (2018) demonstrate some serious limitations on the ability of an organization to manage history as a competitive resource. Based on an analysis of Emmaus, a large charitable organization in France, and its founder, Abbé Pierre, the study shows how organizations use four management dimensions—appropriation, ownership, maintenance, and distancing—to manage history as a competitive resource. Despite these efforts, however, Cailluet et al. caution that because the image, stories, and related attributes of the founder form part of the common property of historical experience, there are serious limits on the ability of the organization to fully 'manage' the historical resource. As the study demonstrates, the value of any organizational historical resource is diminished when it is available as a public good and can be interpreted and used by external actors in ways that conflict with the strategic purpose of the organization.

The Social Embeddedness of Historical Consciousness

In addition to demonstrating the range of organizational uses to which history is put, the papers in the special issue also deepen our understanding of the socially embedded character of the interpretive processes that shape historical consciousness in organizations and fields. They do so by incorporating and theorizing the roles of materiality, intertextuality, competing narratives, practices, audiences, and other stakeholders in the historical process.

The "uses of the past" approach, and rhetorical history in particular, has posited an agentic role for management in part by emphasizing the interpretive character of history within

organizations (i.e., Garud, Kumaraswamy, & Karnøe, 2010; Suddaby et al., 2010). Management research had traditionally conflated “history” with “the past,” an assumption that seriously restricted the range of agency afforded to managers. Perhaps the best example of this is the way in which history is theorized in evolutionary economics (i.e., Nelson & Winter, 1982) where historical events—primarily changes in technology and routines—provide key sources of variation in managerial agency, but which are subsumed under the agency of the market which selects winners and losers. The market was seen to exist outside the agency of managers, in the same way that the environment is theorized as being exogenous to the agency of organisms in evolutionary theory in biology (Penrose, 1952).

In both cases, history was treated as the longitudinal sequence of past events with which organizations or organisms must contend and the capacity of organizations or organisms to influence their environment is largely ignored. A variety of constructs—“path dependence,” “legacy,” “imprinting”—are used to locate agency in the flow of events that comprise the past, rather than in the managers who populate the organizations. Notably, the absence of human agency has been criticized in both biological and economic theories of evolution (Penrose, 1952).

By contrast, when history is understood as an act of interpretation that is conceptually distinct from the flow of events that comprise the past, that is mobilized in the present, the degree of agency in how descriptions of those events might be summarized, ordered, infused with meaning and value, and projected becomes apparent. The mobilization of the past as history occurs through symbolic action, most typically language or rhetoric, defined by Kenneth Burke (1962, p. 565) as the “use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents.” Rhetoric can, of course, be extended to visual rhetoric, to incorporate artefacts, music, and other images used with similar intent (Barthes, 1977).

While maintaining the fundamentally interpretive and potentially agentic character of historical interpretation, recent work by both organization theorists (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., forthcoming) and organizational historians (Hansen, 2012b, 2018; Mordhorst, 2014) has emphasized the socially embedded processes through which historical interpretations gain authenticity and influence, as well as the ways in which historical interpretations may be contested. A number of the papers in the special issue contribute to this development.

Maclean et al. (2018), for instance, highlight the role of intertextuality in the production of historical knowledge. Rather than focusing on the single text or speech act, the authors demonstrate that historical texts acquire their rhetorical power in part by the way they “appropriate prior works to produce new texts.” Blagoev et al. (2018) move beyond the linguistic quality of the texts themselves to also take into account their materiality—what the authors call the “technologies of memory.” Using the case of the digitalization at the British Museum archives, they show how the material and technical qualities of a text or artefact played a role in “actively orienting organizational action in the present.” The paper emphasizes “how the materiality of objects inherited from the past also actively constrained and oriented how actors worked upon various obstacles on the path to digitization.”

Lubinski (2018) draws in several other contextual elements that take into account the situated character of the uses of the past. In particular, she emphasizes the ways in which historical representation does not acquire influence through the act of interpretation in isolation but in relation to its reception and response by various audiences, through critique of existing or competing narratives, and in the social practices in which they are embedded. Overall, Lubinski argues, these elements point to a need for organization scholars to move beyond examining history as “told” to examining history as “experienced” and to study the uses of history as a dialogical process.

Finally, Cailluet et al. (2018) emphasize the way in which attempts to shape history often “elude[s] the sole control of the organization.” Like Lubinski, they emphasize the role of “various

stakeholders” in shaping history, which makes it “both an asset and an arena for struggle.” Both papers see history as a complex historical resource for managers in that interpretations of the past are constantly subject to contestation.

The special issue hence recognizes the interpretive agency of managers in uses of the past but does so in ways that considerably deepen our understanding of the complex social processes at play in how it shapes order and disorder in organizations.

New Frontiers of the Past

While the scholarship on the uses of the past in organizations and organizing has developed rapidly over the last decade, the field still remains ripe for further exploration. In this section, we consider four promising research frontiers that represent significant new research opportunities.

The role of temporal and spatial form in the uses of the past

Although organizational researchers have been attentive to analyzing the *content* of historical representations and the *processes* by which the past is evoked in studying the performative power of history in organizing, less attention has been paid to the crucial issue of the *form* in which history is represented (but see Hansen, 2012b and Dalpiaz & di Stefano, 2018 for notable exceptions). White (1987), Carr (1991), and a handful of other philosophers and historians (see Hansen, 2012; Mordhorst, 2008; Mordhorst & Schwarzkopf, 2017; Roberts, 2001) have highlighted the importance of form, and particularly of narrative structure—a beginning in which a central problem arises, a middle in which the tension grows and struggles play out, and an end where they are resolved—in shaping the relationship between past, present, and future that historical representations convey. This work has brought attention to the role of form in the representation of the past by academic historians (White, 1973) and in the construction of reality by everyday actors (Carr, 1991), and there is a valuable opportunity in linking this work to the burgeoning research on “temporal structures” in organizations (Hernes, 2014; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

Indeed, the temporal form that historical representations take in organizations may be as important as the content of that representation in shaping actors’ perceptions of the temporal relationship between past, present, and future. One clear opportunity lies in extending the work that has been produced on how variations in the narrative structure of historical representation shapes perception, choice, and action in organizations. For example, such research could elaborate on how narrative structure shapes strategy (Brunninge, 2009; Dalpiaz & di Stefano, 2018; Mordhorst, 2008) or understandings of value (Hansen, 2012b, 2018). Historical narrative forms that look to the past as a source for reinvention in the present, as is illustrated in the case of Carlsberg’s use of the motto *semper ardens* (Hatch & Schultz, 2017) may have very different performative implications than historical narratives that imply the need for a revolutionary break from the past, as is exemplified by the spread of narratives of “disruptive innovation” (Lepore, 2014). There are also opportunities for organizational researchers to examine non-narrative forms by which the past is made present in organizations. For instance, the use of timelines as a form that conveys continuity and progress may be very different than the performance of historical rituals that emphasize tradition and a constant return to the past.

Research on historical forms can also be fruitfully applied to examining the social organization of space as well as the social experience of time (Linde, 2008). Indeed, the form in which history is represented varies widely across social and organizational fields, and researchers have the opportunity to examine how these variations shape differences in the way in which the past is used. To begin, the material media (e.g., journal articles, academic books, exhibits, movies, documentaries,

advertisements, etc.) though which past is represented varies widely (Ravasi et al., forthcoming; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), as do the physical spaces (e.g., museums, libraries, theatres, websites) in and through which these representations are made visible to actors (Decker, 2014; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018). The display and curation of artefacts in museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Ravasi et al., forthcoming), for instance, is a form of historical representation that differs markedly from the incorporation of history into advertising and branding in corporate communications and marketing (Holt, 2004) and from the publication of an academic book within a university setting (Iggers, 1997). Organizational narratives also take a range of softer forms, embedded in information and communication systems, hierarchies, processes, and myriads of other non-textual and non-material forms. These material, spatial, and other forms through which the past is made present in turn shape the practices through which history is produced and consumed within a field, as well as the kinds of “knowledge” that that history conveys. The practices that surround the production and consumption of an exhibit designed to convey the authenticity of an identity (Evrard & Krebs, 2018; Gilmore & Pine, 2007) differ from the practices related to the incorporation of history into entertainment designed to infuse a sense of realism into the production of amusement. Thus, explorations of how historical form shapes such social spaces and practices in organizations and organizing remain a significant research opportunity that would expand the conversation about the uses of the past.

Varieties of historical knowing

Given that the recent work on the “uses of the past” in organizations has focused on the strategic value of history to managers, much of the empirical work in the emerging field has concentrated on the rational or calculative processes to which the past is deployed in the present. Yet the “uses of past” approach rests on the much broader assumption that humans are historical beings who experience the world through historical consciousness in ways that are not limited only to rational and reflective relationships with the past (Carr, 1991). A robust set of research opportunities exist for scholars interested in non-rational and non-strategic ways in which history performs organizational work.

One domain for further exploration would be in craft-based industries and professions in which historical knowledge may be embodied as much in skills, practices, and aesthetic sensibilities as in language. Hatch and Schultz (2017, p. 32), for instance, find that at Carlsberg the authenticity of the historical motto “semper ardens” rested in large part of the perception among actors that it was “true to craft.” Research in women’s (Ulrich, 2001) and labor history (Gutman, 1977) provide similarly rich examples of the ways in which craft-based practices and sensibilities formed a mode by which actors engaged with the past. History and tradition play important roles in such embodied knowledge, but the processes by which these are conveyed and the organizational implications for the continuity and coherence of a practice or profession may be very different than in cases where historical identity is represented in more well-defined narratives.

Likewise, recent research (Bell & Taylor, 2016; Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013; Ravasi et al., forthcoming) indicates the potential for exploring the role of emotions in the “history work” performed by organizations—or to the “emotional work” history performs. A handful of business historians have begun to bring emotions into their work (Holt & Popp, 2013), reflecting the growth of the broader scholarly interest in the history of emotions (Plamper, 2010; Reddy, 2001), but this work has typically examined the past of emotional experiences rather than how emotions might be recruited or evoked when organizations use history. One notable exception has been research on nostalgia when an organizational community engages with the past in ways that shape experience and action in the present (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Likewise Popp (2018)

has examined some of the emotions, most notably nostalgia, contained in and provoked by sites of industrial heritage (themselves an important form of organizational representation). But nostalgia remains only one of a range of ways in which historical representations work to perform emotions in organizations, especially in certain firms such as family businesses.

A broader range of methods

Much of the empirical research on the uses of the past in leading management journals (Anteby & Molnár, 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., forthcoming) has employed widely accepted qualitative and process-oriented methods in organization studies, which use procedures for codifying the processes by which particular representations of the past are generated and performed (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Langley, 1999). These methods are excellent for examining and formalizing the processes and actions managers and organizations may take to generate particular historical knowledge claims, and should continue to form one set of techniques for studying the uses of the past in organizations and organizing. However, particularly novel insights may also be found by employing a range of other methods, most notably historical methods and experimental techniques.

One promising opportunity lies in more expansively using historical research methods in studying the uses of the past in organizations (e.g., Hansen, 2012b; Lubinski, 2018; Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993). Historical methods involve abductive reasoning using a retrospective point of view, a vantage point that allows the researcher to interpret actions or events based on their consequences as well as their causes (Wadhvani & Decker, 2018). The use of historical perspective allows scholars to generate robust contextualization of organizational action and rhetoric because it typically takes into account both longer spans of time and broader sets of actors and developments beyond the organization in interpreting a particular action (e.g., Hargadon & Douglas, 2001), including with the aim of analyzing complex social processes (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2014). For instance, historical perspective allows the researcher to trace the reception of historical claims among multiple audiences, and to take into account evolving responses and contestations over a particular use of the past (Mordhorst, 2014). It also allows researchers to account for surprise and irony in the use of history—crucial factors that can confound the intentional use of history in organizations. Some varieties of historical methods—such as microhistory and ethnographic history—hold particular promise in analyzing the socially embedded dynamics involved in the uses of the past over time (Rowlinson et al., 2014). The abductive character of historical methods can also open up opportunities for a more reflexive examination on the role of the researcher in the analysis of the uses of the past, since it embraces the stance that methods are not only procedural but inherently subjective (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Popp and Holt (2013a), for instance, highlight the value of this reflexivity in examining how a historical researcher's perspective on an organizational opportunity differs fundamentally from that of the subject of research because of the researcher's situatedness in time and place.

Engagement with historical methods would also allow organizational scholars to redefine and expand the boundaries of what they consider appropriate sources; in particular it means a greater critical engagement with archival sources, sources that are currently viewed with something close to suspicion (Yates, 2014). Organizational choices around archiving are one of the subtlest but most powerful ways in which historical representations become encoded within an organization. First, archives form the primary source of materials organizations draw on in shaping their historical representations (Decker, 2013; Schwarzkopf, 2013). Second, archives always reflect acts of choosing, even if that is to neglect to choose (Fellman & Popp, 2013; Lipartito, 2014). Thus, we can interpret not only the contents of the archive to gain insight into the organizational past itself

but we can also interrogate the archive, the fact of its existence, and the choices and practices it has been shaped by, as a representational mechanism and form.

Another methodological opportunity lies in the use of experimental methods to examine how particular historical representations or analogies actually shape organizational actors' choices and behavior. Indeed, work in experimental psychology has already proven powerful in showing how knowledge of a historical outcome significantly increases subjects' estimations of the likelihood of that outcome, and that subjects are largely unaware of how knowledge of historical outcomes shapes their own perceptions and the perceptions of others (Fischhoff, 1975; Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975; Gilovich, 1981). March, Sproull, and Tamuz (1991) discuss the importance of such experimental research for understanding how organizations learn or don't learn from "samples of one or fewer," yet there has been relatively little experimental follow-up work that explicitly looks at how historical knowledge shapes decisions related to risk and uncertainty in organizations. Such experimental approaches therefore continue to represent an untapped methodological approach for examining the consequences of historical analogies on decision-making in organizations.

Ethics and the uses of the past in organizations

The field's initial emphasis on examining the strategic value of history in organizations begs for an equally important but distinct line of inquiry into questions of the ethics of the uses of the past by managers. The research finding that a particular historical representation can be a powerful resource for a manager in shaping organizations and organizing does not address the question of whether that representation *should* be used by the manager. Thus far, the latter question has not received significant attention by organizational researchers, despite its profoundly important implications for both theory and practice in the world we face today.

The question of the ethics of the uses of the past in organizations deserves sustained and extensive attention, and we suggest it involves at least three dimensions with implications for both managers and scholars. The first is a matter of the ethics of falsifying incorrect representations. The matter is not as simple as it at first appears, in part because some mischaracterizations may do little harm and still represent the past in an essentially truthful light, while other distortions of events or people may be deeply destructive in imperceptible ways. Indeed, we suggest that the ethical role of falsification in the uses of past may have more to do with critique of powerful actors and myths than it has to do with objectivity. For instance, O'Connor's (1999) study falsifying and revising the claim that the "human relations school" originated in fundamentally humanistic motives in contrast to the efficiency-oriented motives of F. W. Taylor is designed as a critique of a powerful actor (Harvard Business School) and a powerful identity myth in management thought.

A second dimension involves the matter of whether organizations and managers may at times have a positive ethical obligation to examine and consider the past seriously and reflexively even when it may challenge organizational identities, values, or goals in the present. Given that historical interpretation inherently involves value judgments held in the present, are there moments when organizations should turn to the past to challenge and confront those values, self-identities, and ways of seeing the world rather than using the past to enforce them? Examples of instances where firms ought to have or needed to engage with the past on ethical grounds include German firms that reckoned with their role in National Socialism (Wiesen, 2001) and the entanglement of American firms and American capitalism with American slavery (Baptist, 2014; Murphy, 2005). Likewise, an increasingly important issue pertains to how firms that have engaged in environmental degradation in the past should grapple with that history and

its implications for their identities and strategies in the present. Scholarship in these areas could examine examples of situations in which organizations ought to have or did grapple with a past that transgressed values held in the present, yet research in the areas of business ethics and corporate responsibility tends to be separated from the growing empirical and theoretical scholarship on the “uses of the past.” As Schrempf-Stirling, Palazzo, and Phillips (2016, p. 700) point out, “there is little or no scholarly theorizing about the ways contemporary managers engage with these critiques or how this corporate engagement with the past affects the legitimacy of current business.”

A third dimension involves the question of whether, when, and how managers and organization scholars have any obligation to represent less powerful and more marginal actors within the history of the organization, even when these representations do not align with management’s representation of the past. Motivated by the insight that historical representation is important to identity and power in the present, academic historians have been driven at least in part by ethical considerations in developing historical fields focused on underrepresented groups and regions of the world (Appleby et al., 1994). It is not clear whether and on what grounds managers ought to be driven by similar professional ethics as academic historians, but we posit that a clearer case could be made that organization scholars—increasingly aware of the power that historical representation holds—do have a positive ethical and normative obligation to critique the uses of the past by managers, and not just describe and theorize it (Stutz & Sachs, 2018).

Indeed, studies of the ethics of the uses of the past in organizations may prove to be one of the most original lines of inquiry in this field. In a sense, the finding that powerful actors proffer interpretations of the past to further their strategic aims in the present can be seen as commonplace in the world we now inhabit. And potentially insightful and impactful research lies ahead in considering when and how this power to use the past in the present should be scrutinized.

Conclusion

Interest in the uses of the past in organizations and organizing has flourished in recent years. The articles in this special issue—along with an array of other publications in leading management journals—attest to both the significance of this line of research and the substantive conceptual and empirical contributions that have recently been made to it. Moreover, as this article highlights, important research vistas within the stream remain largely unexplored, and open to scholars interested in entering the conversation. Indeed, the “uses of the past” remains fertile ground for further exploration within management and organizational research.

The field represents an especially rich opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and engagement. Rooted in common intellectual origins in hermeneutics and the linguistic turn, both organization scholars and historians have developed significant theoretical and empirical literature on the uses of the past. Yet, their approaches to the subject have differed in important and interesting ways. While organization scholars have focused on the micro-processes and temporal structures of historical interpretation in organizations, historians have been primarily concerned with the contexts within which this occurs and the struggles between firms and other actors to define the past. This special issue and introduction have provided a forum for bringing these perspectives together and have highlighted the opportunities that lie at the nexus of the two disciplines.

Implicit within the emergence of the “uses of the past” approach is an embrace of what Mayer Zald (1996, p. 256) called the essential “historicity of organizational life.” History, in this sense, is not only a topic or method within organization studies. It is integral to the very processes that create order and disorder in organizations.

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Author biographies

Dan Wadhvani is Fletcher Jones Professor of Entrepreneurship at University of the Pacific (USA). He is also an adjunct professor at Ritsumeikan University and a visiting professor at Copenhagen Business School, University of Kyoto, and University of Southern California. He is the co-editor of *Organizations in Time: History, Theory, Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

Mads Mordhorst is Associate Professor and the Head of Centre for Business History at Copenhagen Business School. He has a position as Professor II at Oslo University.

Roy Suddaby is the Winspear Chair of Management at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria, Canada and the Chair in Organization Theory at the Liverpool Management School. He is an adjunct professor at Ritsumeikan University and an honorary professor at Copenhagen Business School. Roy was recently named a JMI scholar by the Western Academy of Management.

Andrew Popp is Visiting Professor in Entrepreneurship at the University of Baltimore. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Enterprise and Society: The International Journal of Business History*.