Part III

Methods: doing management and organizational history
10

Managing the past

Alun Munslow

The postmodern (multi-sceptical) incursion with its epistemic doubts about any form of foundationalism in terms of the ‘story of the past’ has produced but failed to answer what are for most practitioner historians a series of tiresome and irrelevant questions. These questions have been about whether history is the fundamental prerequisite to (a) knowing where we came from and (b) becoming the basis for future planning. As is well known, for ‘postmodern historians’ the utility – indeed the very idea – of ‘learning from the past’ is unavoidably fraught with epistemological and ontological problems. Not least among these is how to manage ‘the-past-as-history’.

Of course, for some history theorists – one immediately thinks of Keith Jenkins – the question is whether we need ‘history’ at all (Jenkins, 1991, 2003, 2013). Or at least, do we need history defined in a particular way – that particular kind of history that its advocates and practitioners have self-defined as being practical, realist, empirical, analytical (specifically inferential/colligatory) and representationalist?

The late 1960s and early 1970s have become characterized (shall we say ‘narrated’?) as a time of a widespread rethinking of the theory, practice, and functioning of the academic discipline of history. Like all narrative discourses the ‘discipline of history’ – itself characterized by a series of narrative discourses – was and for many historians still is validated by and through its supposed ability to help shape and explain the ‘historical’ nature of our society by discovering and offering its most likely narrative. Indeed (as I write in early 2013), the outgoing President of the American Historical Association, William Cronon, defended ‘Storytelling’ for keeping the past alive. This is done by the historian’s self-consciousness about how they narrate the past (Cronon, 2013). For him, it is telling well-founded interpretational stories about the past that makes the past come alive.

According to Cronon the aesthetics of storytelling – narrative techniques – are by professional convention not permitted to professional historians. But, while he laments the failure of historians to acknowledge that they are authors, the constraints of evidence remain. In his analysis historians need to recognize the complementarity nature of history and fiction in creating ‘historical reality’. In saying this he seems to be suggesting that historians ought to be aware of how the past can be more open to representational conventions in narrative forms. Historians ought to be more open to the trade-off between fiction and history in trying to make ‘living history’. To do this historians need to be more explicit in their storytelling in order to make ‘living history’.
But this argument, while it sounds reasonable is fundamentally wrong. The epistemological notion of ‘living history’ is a contradiction in terms. It is an oxymoron just as much as is ‘auto-pilot’ and ‘an accurate estimate’. The reason is simple but profound. It is that the past is the past and history is a narrative we create about it. They belong to distinct ontological worlds. Thus, how can ‘the past’ become ‘living history’? Indeed, is the notion of a ‘historical consciousness’ really about the past at all? Perhaps (though I would say ‘surely’) the ontology of history is that it must be considered a narrative consciousness/creation that is written about the past. That there may be heavy-duty well-attested empirical references makes no difference to its ontology as a form of narrative.

But (possibly to make matters worse?), a ‘historical consciousness’ is assumed to be essential to understanding our culture and ourselves. But, of course, there are many different practical forms – or kinds – of historical consciousness. So, it is ‘naturally’ supposed because it seems to be simple common sense that like all cultural discourses the discourse of Management and Organization Studies needs not just a historical consciousness but its own historical consciousness. It must have a sense and understanding of the past not just to comprehend its own development but more widely to allow practitioners to ‘learn and remember and apply the lessons’ that MOS – in its historical form – provides. This ‘surely’ allows sensible and rational decision-making for the present and future? Without ‘a sense of the past’ or ‘a historical perspective’, which is defined in terms of acquiring the probable meaning and or explanation of events, we are all (including managers), surely, cut adrift in time? Indeed, we cannot operate at all? But this ‘historical consciousness logic’ is wrong. Let me explain why I think this.

I was taught as both an undergraduate and early on as a postgraduate, and what remains axiomatic for the substantial majority of ‘history practitioners’, that ‘the historical consciousness’ is always and forever to be defined as an empirical, analytical (which as I have already noted is specifically inferential and colligatory), and written representationalist discourse. So, the (narrative of the) past is ‘discovered’ by historians in their professionalized pursuit of the most likely meaning/explanation of the past. Narrative and meaning are one in the same. Thus, the British historian Arthur Marwick famously defined history as “[t]he bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians, together with everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge” (Marwick, 2013). He argued that what happens in the present, and probably what will happen in the future, is very much governed by what happened in the past. So, as he said, imagine what it would be like with no organized and empirically accurate knowledge of the past. Surely, we could not make enlightened judgements concerning parallels with the present?

Because of this epistemological belief there is a common understanding among historians and just about everyone else who wishes to ‘know what happened in the past’ that (a) what the past most probably means will (b) inform sensible decision-making. Now, in ‘the pursuit of history’ it is claimed that all historians owe a duty of care to be sceptical about what the evidence suggests concerning the most likely meaning and explanation of the past. That is, always be wary of what the most likely story seems to be. It follows historians – and managers – have a responsibility not to ‘read into’ the data of the past meanings/explanations which have more to do with the historian and the manager than the past. Objectivity (aka impartiality, disinterest, detachment, and/or neutrality) is thus a key element in both collecting data and in their interpretation. Essential to this is unambiguous (if occasionally tediously technical) and well-constructed communication. So, the aim of objective interpretation and clear (re-)presentation – and primarily on the printed/online page – demands rationality and insight so it can be a rampart against self-serving subjectivity?

So, the honest, rational, objectivity seeking/sustaining and representationalist historian (manager) of the past ensures that their prose is always bent to the needs of the data and their reasoned
Managing the past

inference. Of course, the past will not – in all (Bayesian?) probability – tell us what its history is (McCullagh, 1984, 1998). However, writing history tends to lean on the probabilities in its pursuit of creating ‘historical belief’. That is why it is regularly re-‘visioned’. It is revised as new data and smarter inferences come along. So, the common compromise is to believe that history is clearly a form of literature but it is not a work of literature. Now, history is increasingly shaped into a variety of ‘popular presentational forms’ such as re-enactment, stage plays, films, digital games, museum stands, ‘historical sites’, and monuments and memorials. However, the scholarly, accurately written, and representationalist ‘on the page’ (with appropriately detailed footnotes so the reader can cross-check data and authorial inferences) form remains the epistemic gold standard. We ‘seek’ reflection (the verb with and also without object) ‘in’ and ‘on’ history.

So, given the professionalization process of the past 150 years or so there are many trained and practised constraints which have been developed in order to ensure this inferential and representationalist process can be achieved. And these constraints have become the core values for all disciplines that deal with the past. These also include management and organization studies. Indeed, not just for most historians but also for almost everyone else the assumption is that the past dictates its own history which can be ‘detected’ and then ‘re-presented/represented’ for what it most likely meant. Put at its most basic level – the past must have ‘its own discoverable story’ that the manager, historian, airline pilot, shopkeeper, surgeon, and anyone at any time doing almost anything can ‘learn from’.

Of course, there are ‘obvious’ constraints on this process which everyone recognizes such as the possibility of flawed data and/or the drawing of inappropriate inferences by the ‘manager-historian’. And while there is always a desire to reconstruct the past for what it most likely was/meant, human frailty and intervention in the process of ‘telling it like it was’ mean the best we hope for is a sensible and rational, judicious, and honest construction of the past on the page or the PowerPoint presentation or in the balance sheet. So, while the past cannot be reconstructed for what it was (doing that would be a form of resurrectionism?) the ‘realities of the past’ can – as much as the available (re-)sources allow – be honestly and faithfully constructed again through the shrewd inferences drawn by the historian from the primary and secondary sources.

So, the ‘desire for its history’ (of whatever ‘object/person’) is directly connected to the historian’s responsibility to the established procedures of professional historical scholarship, the central tenet of which is that ‘the past’ is always explained in its own terms. Consequently, judgements of and on the meaning of ‘the past’ are controlled by their production process conforming to established procedures that are predicated on practical realist and representationalist epistemic beliefs. There is a relatively simple algorithm at work. It is this. The narrative we call ‘History’ (as just defined) offers the most likely meaning and explanation of the past by comparing and contrasting the sources. This in turn is likely to be informed by ‘appropriate theory’. The conclusions of this (actually quite straightforward process) are presented in the refereed academic text or ‘report of findings’ which is itself cast in a form of writing which is founded on the epistemological belief in written representationalism. Any problems that may exist in the connection assumed to exist between a history’s narrative form and explanatory function will be resolved by the provision of an empirically verified and well-argued explanation given in appropriately accurate language. Interpretations remain interpretations but they can be reasoned and reasonable.

It follows, given (a) the balance that is possible between the past real world and its present representation, which (b) accepts an essentially transparent connection between language and reality, ‘a history’ is (c) a professional form of language-use that cannot be judged in terms that might be applied to ‘more literary’ and much less ‘figurative’ forms of writing. And it is certainly not an exercise in aesthetics (even if the PowerPoint presentation uses ‘nice graphics’ to get the point across). Hence (and obviously?), we cannot judge a history as we might a fictional
narrative. Now, it is fairly well understood that this understanding of ‘the pursuit of history’ has been confronted by the multi-sceptical epistemological insurgency of the past 60 or more years. While it is difficult to summarize this insurrection in a pithy phrase there has been a wholesale deconstruction the logic of empirical–analytical–representationalist historying.¹

Most (in)famously (in my list) is Hayden White who defined the ‘historical work’ as a prose discourse that combines data (empiricism), concepts and inferences (analysis) in a (really quite complex) narrative structure (of representation). This logic applies to all forms of discursive literature because as White insisted a history narrative is not a verbatim listing of past real events. It is a prose discourse and as such, it is not possible to view it as being true or false to the meaning of the data selected. By that he meant (well, I think he meant) that we need to define the ontology of a history as a figurative and interpretational representation of past real events and if we do (as we surely must?) we are committed to asking what is the cognitive import of the ontology of the history narrative? And the ‘history narrative’ can be located in all sites where a ‘review of the past’ is required. In all this the ‘atomic level data’ remain.

For White (and many theorists subsequently) ‘history’ was and should be viewed for what it most patently is (which is still in opposition to the judgement of most professional historians) as an unprivileged narrative form. What he means (as I read him) is that ‘histories’ contain a profound ‘structural content’ that is poetic/linguistic in nature. Like all other coherent narratives that endeavour ‘to explain’? So, ‘to explain’ the most likely meaning of ‘events in the past’ it is ontologically unavoidable (there is no alternative) that the historian’s ‘authoring’ or ‘trans-forming’ of the past into a story (that explains meaning) is systematized by a combination of tropes (figuration), emplotments, arguments, and a range of ideological choices.

As White suggested, the logic in all this is that no singular set of actions or events possess their own intrinsic or given emplotment. Of course most historians still believe the opposite. So, writing history invariably comes down to the individual historian’s arrangement of these components of thought. Briefly then, this logic which is still both defended and disputed, is whether one believes or does not believe that the ‘meaning’ of an event in the past is not located only in the ‘historical writing’ about it, but in some kind of figurative and semiotic composition of the event itself. To be as plain as language permits: do you (dear reader) believe human beings live narratives, or impose narratives, or both? So what is the logic to written or otherwise (per)formed history? It seems to me that (a) the past is not prearranged for us in the form of coherent stories and this entails (b) historians (managers?) are required to recreate such (hi-)stories (for any number of reasons), and (c) that we historians (managers?) give them referentiality by choosing to believe that in those stories the past ‘speaks to us’. Hence we have the common yet highly suspicious notion ‘… that the data lead us to believe ….’. The upshot then is to direct our attention to how we ‘narrate our histories’ as opposed to ‘discovering the most likely narrative back there’.

So, if there is no certain and thereby ‘discoverable for what it was’ or ‘given narrative’ in the past, even if we ‘commonsensically’ think there must be, we are condemned to create ‘the-past-as-history’. Hence ‘history’ is most appropriately defined and designated as an emplotted, figured, and argued (for or against) ‘form’ of ‘narrative explanation’. Accordingly, if we assume that ‘writing a history’ is an authorial activity (which I think is not an unreasonable assumption) it suggests that thinking about the nature of history is at some important level thinking about writing narratives (Munslow, 2007). So, the past is the past – what once was and is no more – and all we have is a narrative we write about the past. The claim that ‘the past’ is capable of being conflated with ‘its history’ is only persuasive if we ignore their ontologies. This, of course, is what most people do and that includes most historians. For me – and I am happy to admit that I do not think this is much of an insight – creating narratives is all we can do. So, we ought to understand how we do that.
This is why I have laboured over this argument. Let me explain further by asking a question that has been asked before. What is the nature of the knowledge base for management and administration? Over 20 years ago one commentator defended the way public sector managers obtain and deploy knowledge (Hummel, 1991; cf. Willmott, 1997). It was argued in contrast to those who suggested that public administration needed to generate and use knowledge based on ‘objectivity’ and ‘pure reason’ that the way managers interpret their world – their ‘story-telling’ – was and is a valid means for constructing and accruing knowledge. The specific outcome of that ‘story-telling’ largely derives from how managers ‘figure’ their world – how they trope or ‘figuratively turn’ meanings.

So, management decision(s) making is about figurative synthesis – troping literal meaning – as much as it might be analysis. Managers ought not to be worried about this as it is part of the human creation of (a) narrative(s). Commonly (or so I gather) managers deploy the descriptive ‘case study narrative’. Of course, as with all narrative making there is a risk because having alternative narratives to hand in any given decision-making situation may have greater utility than the single ‘scientific report of findings’, but this might force a collective agreement to a narrative that is not – as it might turn out – the ‘best’ narrative available. Unfortunate though it may be, it is the nature of our narrative-making existence. Once we doubt there is a ‘given story back there’ then life becomes extremely problematic. There is, after all no such thing as ‘literal meaning’. The correspondence theory of truth does not apply to making narratives.

Now, fairly obviously (nice irony?) what you are reading is my preferred narrative about managerial narratives and while I am offering (in a prose form) my research findings I am unavoidably creating a fictive narrative. In my narrative I am writing about a (my) preferred way to think about the functioning of narrative. So, an important part of my narrative (about narrative) is my claim (my understanding?) that for most managers their narratives (usually about solving management problems) require (a) empirical foundations to their knowledge about what once happened which is an ontological issue and (b) what they think they know about the past in terms of meaning/explanation which is delivered via an inferential epistemological process, but then (c) they (and I) have to represent it in some way. So, the fruits of (a) ontology and (b) epistemology are (c) a performative representation as a lecture, a written report, a PowerPoint presentation, and so forth. To reduce all this to a simple formula (not that that is necessarily a good thing) it is empiricism + inference + representation = meaning. I then assume some sort of action/inaction will ensue.

Now, if I am right (and I do not have to be – this is only my unprivileged narrative after all) I think it is necessary for me to illustrate what I am arguing by offering you my own fictive ‘historical narrative’. Let me be clear (as much as language allows) about the meaning of fictive. By fictive I refer to the nature of history which derives directly from the rendezvous of the historian as an author/storyteller with the time before now. So, rather than a re(-)presentation of what once was, history is a narrative intervention that is beyond the formula of empiricism, inference, representationalism and probable meaning acquisition. I am suggesting that every history is a narrative constructed by the historian which is not to say the (hi)story is a fiction. But equally it is beyond touching epistemological simplicities of empirical practical realism and the interpretative report of ‘findings’.

In arriving at this understanding I make a number of assumptions. My first is, of course, that there are no observers or observations outside the past–history ontological and epistemological universe. While there are probabilities in meaning/explanation they still have to be narrated. Hence, there is no ‘outside narrative’ position. Human beings (and yes, that includes managers) have to represent their ideas on ‘what was’ before they can evaluate ‘what it is’ much less ‘what it means’. Arguably the primary element in ‘understanding’ is the process of ‘narrating the
observation’. But we must remember that there are no observations without an observer and no ‘findings’ outside a narrative. All observations have to be narrated (even if ‘the narrative’ is ‘given the form’ of a table of ‘results’ of statistical inference). It is no great insight to acknowledge that no matter how it may be presented if ‘the past reality’ is not narrated it does not have any meaning – even probabilities have to be narrated and emplotted to acquire a meaning.

None of what I have just said rules out ‘the reality’ of being run over by a bus, or being punched on the nose or getting divorced. But ‘to understand’ the nature or ‘meaning’ of such ontological events they have ‘to be narrated’. What I hope is particularly significant in this argument is that what ‘the past-as-history’ means is not the product of a straightforward empirical, analytical and representationalist activity. As is well known, in his (in)famous text *Metahistory* Hayden White (1973) described the ‘historical imagination’ as consisting of a determining deep level of human unconscious which is itself configured by the four major tropes of figurative language: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These are the tropes through which human beings both ‘pre-figure’ and then constantly ‘re-figure’ the sequence of historical events ‘found’ in the evidence.

So, which figurative trope is ‘preferred’ (and it might be an unconscious or conscious choice between metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and/or irony) in order to describe any event or body of data, is also likely to determine the nature of the emplotment of the data (which could be romantic, tragic, comedic, and/or satiric). To make matters worse for the ‘tell it like it was’ hard-hatted historian or manager the argument they deploy (formist, mechanist, organicist, and contextualist) is also going to be in some way or another determined by their previous tropic and emplotment choice. And if this was not enough narrative-making determinism, there is a constrained range of ideological/political implications (anarchist, radicalism, conservatism, and liberalism). But these are only probable connections (which are attested only by studies of narrative forms). Needless to say this has created 40 years of debate over (a) the White model and its correlative affinities (which are pretty much what I have just described) and (b) whether historians really are just another group of unprivileged authors even as we wade hip-deep in data sources. It also throws substantial doubt over the alternative practical realist (non-narrativist) model of empiricism, analysis, and representation which, if I were being ungenerous, I might call ‘a non-narrative/scientificist approach’ which, for all I know, are likely to be very close to the hearts of hard hat empirical-analytical-representationalist historians/managers.

Anyway, and like it or not, it is not just White but also other heavy-duty philosophers such as Heidegger and Kant who have raised important issues about the nature of ‘knowing’ and ‘representing’. So, while it can be argued that ‘scientific’ laws may be universal (in the sense that in general apples fall to the ground from trees) but as to their application in specific circumstances ‘it all depends’ on the presence of an interventionist and observing subject plus the methodology they deploy in understanding and explaining the meaning of any object or process in the physical world. We are all too familiar with the common problem of the observer affecting the observed. And it gets even worse when the object no longer exists, i.e. ‘the past’.

And so we are in a serious predicament when it comes to ‘what the past means’ or ‘what is the most likely story back there?’. After all, is it that unreasonable to suggest that while judicious interpretation is possible how can we possibly know that empirical observation shored up with reasonable inference can bottom out the nature of ‘what it (the situation being narrated) really means’? It reduces to the now universally recognized situation that empiricism is blind without conceptualization, argument, ideology, and emplotment. Knowing ‘what most probably happened’ cannot bottom out ‘what it most probably means’. So, managers like everyone else have to create useful or ‘fitness for purpose’ narratives. But to do that they also need to understand the nature of narratives and, of course, why some are (or seem to be) more convincing than others. Narratives do not merely record reality, they help create it.
Now, as it turns out one of my mid-career interests as a historian was the life and work of the entrepreneur Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) (Munslow, 1988, 1992). Because I was authoring a brief biography of Carnegie (as part of a larger project on the connections between discourse and culture) I endeavoured to evaluate his thinking and actions by searching through his writing as any historian would (and happily/unhappily he wrote a lot). So (or should it be ‘but’?), as an author myself I realized that Carnegie’s writings were substances and forms of narrative expression as much as they may be considered as anything else. Consequently, I engaged with my subject at several levels – four to be precise. I was interested in (1) the nature and (2) forms of his written expression as much as I was in (3) the nature and (4) forms of their content. Why? It was because I was interested in Carnegie’s authorial decisions/elements that I felt I had to acknowledge as I too was an author who was well aware of when, what, and why I was writing. Carnegie and I were both authors writing history. And you are reading a history. But what is history? Allow me a brief diversion before I return to Carnegie.

Well, we know what Arthur Marwick thought history was (Marwick, 2013). But his definition will not do. It is naïve in its rejection (or what is worse the non-acknowledgement) that history is a body of writing about a subject (the past) that no longer exists. So, history is a narrative form that is ontologically distinct from the past. History is a substitution for the past that is, of course, created in another form. So, to conflate ‘the past’ with ‘history’ is to commit the fundamental category error of conflating writing with a non-existent reality. Despite the belief that the presence of the past is demonstrably all around us in old chairs, old buildings, established and apparently enduring cultural traditions, economic structures, balance sheets, and people older (and younger) than us it seems to me that all we have in terms of ‘understanding’ and ‘meaning creation’ are the histories we author about the past. At best all we can say is that we create ‘the-past-as-history’. Or, to put this slightly differently: past events have no meaning until they are narrated as history.

This claim, lest it needs repeating, in no way ignores statements of justified belief about the one-time empirical reality of the past. Much less does it mean that some meanings and explanations about ‘what once happened’ may be more or less ‘reasonable’ than others (though it is a mare’s nest defining ‘reasonable’). Nor does it mean that some historical accounts are more or less ‘factual’ than others. Of course if we think about it even this claim is fraught with major problems given that ‘facts’ are – ontologically – events under a description. The point I am labouring to make is – and forgive me – the rather obvious one that historians regularly read and write different stories into the same body of causally connected events (i.e. make authorial decisions or offer ‘interpretations’ if you prefer).

This is not really as tendentious as many historians might suggest (or fear) and does not bear any resemblance to what Marwick called the self-indulgence of ‘the auteur theory’ whereby historians glory in their own subjectivity. As Hayden White so famously argued, a body of data does not necessarily contain a ‘given’ meaning, let alone the most probable meaning. All that connecting up the empirical dots suggests is at best a sort of pointillist historying. It is not too crude or reductionist to say the past can only be engaged with when it is narrated whether that narration is to oneself or to other consumers of history as a film, play, book, novel, chat over a beer, or whatever.

So, there is an ontological dissonance between the ‘the past’ and ‘history’. The ramifications of this for all forms of historying including MOS reports – even if salted liberally with statistical analysis and ‘really smart’ inference – remain substantial. I repeat, some historical interpretations may be more or less likely than others but stretching this to the notion of ‘objectively’ learning lessons about the past shifts epistemic gears considerably. To be frank, it makes no sense to me.
By that I mean ‘the lessons’ of ‘the past’ at the(ir) most basic of ontological levels are entirely ‘the lessons’ of ‘history’. I subscribe to the view that there is no ‘given’ emplotment and/or ‘given’ meaning and/or ‘given’ interpretation in the data of the past. When put this way it seems like a statement of the obvious. The facts do not speak for themselves. All interpretations are based on more than probability in the movement of data. Meanings are fictively construed. There are no lessons in the past. There are only lessons of history.

So to repeat – and before getting back to Andrew Carnegie – the validity of a (hi)story does not lie simply or even primarily in ‘the facts of the (hi)story’. It also resides in its narrative structure as provided by the historian even if they believe they are not creating but discovering it (‘it’ being ‘the story that is believed must be back there’). Of course, that most historians are not boot camp trained in the creation of narratives is not surprising because of the nature of the epistemic priorities inculcated during their training. Historians are not told that they are authors and so are not trained to think and create as authors. They believe they are detecting the (most likely) story. The historian as detective is just another trope and for my money a particularly poor and misleading one.

I would suggest that what I have just described also pertains for managers. Adopting a narrative approach to managing everyday life in an office/factory demands explaining and rationalizing what managers do in terms of creating aims and objectives, calculating progress toward achieving objectives (through organizational structures), motivating colleagues (through what are regarded as ‘inspirational narratives’), securing capital (a narrative of striving), measuring (a narrative that compares their own and everyone else’s) progress, developing staff abilities, and instituting resource acquisition and managing utilization (a scarcity narrative). And all this is done by creating ‘useful’ narratives of achievement and purpose. And these narratives, or so it seems to me, are well established in capitalist-inspired management narratives. Actually, for all I know they may be universal and economic politics might have no relevance.

Andrew Carnegie was not only the richest entrepreneur in the world when he retired in 1901, he was also one of the most published. As is well known, in many magazine articles and several books he described his philosophy of life and entrepreneurship. In a narrative of pluck over luck and bootstrapping effort over everything else his 1920 Autobiography (published a year after his death) suggests that he believed he had two key narratives: a ‘destiny narrative’ which was reinforced by his ‘learning from the past narrative’ (Carnegie, 1920). These narratives are also replete (in my interpretational narrative at least) with his sense that what is required in life is rational moral and/or ethical judgement and that genuine effort can be rewarded. Now, as Hayden White argued, every historical emplotment is structured by the power – or lack of it – of the hero over her/his environment (White, 1973). I assume this is significant when it comes to striving managers. This is, of course, just an assumption on my part.

Anyway, it turned out to be convenient (in my narrative) that Carnegie believed his age was inhabited by entrepreneurial heroes. In 1886 he said “to all those who extol the past and dwell upon its heroes … intimating our own age is less heroic than some age which has preceded it, let us make answer, that for one true hero who existed in any age, a hundred surround us today” (Carnegie, 1886: 442). This was his judgement throughout his life. As he believed, “I can confidently recommend to you the business career as one in which there is abundant room for the exercise of man’s highest power, and of every good quality in human nature” (Carnegie, 1912: 224). As is well understood Carnegie’s defence for his class was a gospel of success which encouraged and marketed the self-made entrepreneur-hero who could surpass the world of experience (Carnegie, 1886). They were his hero.

On one occasion he addressed a commencement class of Cornell University students suggesting that wealth was achievable if they became masters of their world through their own diligence, industriousness, frugality, and temperance which – he announced – were the benchmarks
of his own sense of heroic materialism (Carnegie, 1912). And, he said, American heroes succeed because

universal self-dependence is manifest everywhere and in everything ... The cause of this self-governing capacity lies in the fact that from his earliest youth the republican feels himself a man ... We can confidently claim for the Democracy that it produces a people self-reliant beyond all others; a people who depend less upon governmental aid and more upon themselves ... than any people hitherto known.

(Carnegie, 1886: 443)

This set of beliefs and claims is hardly surprising given that Carnegie was (in my interpretation) his own romantic hero and, like all romantic heroes (as a narrative typology), he located himself as the hero-protagonist at the centre of his own introspected existence and was often misanthropic in equal measure to being philanthropic. So, he began as an immigrant setting out to master the new world and willingly he acknowledged that many new arrivals failed because America is only a favoured land for the most competent and resourceful. As he said, ‘drones’ have no place ‘in her hive’ (Carnegie, 1886). Although the entrepreneur-hero may begin ‘his’ journey as an immigrant Carnegie believed he still must possess the traits of the heroic American. So, in Carnegie’s narrative those who succeed do/did so because they self-fulfil(led) their own prophecy. As a hero they have a goal. As a hero they enable progress. And, as a hero, if they are thwarted so is everyone else. And, of course, it was always a hero not a heroine.

So, Carnegie’s ‘Gospel of Wealth’ became his foundational and defining narrative but it was also a jeremiad (Carnegie, 1889a, 1889b). Only by achieving the aims and objectives of the ‘Gospel of Wealth’ could all the other capitalistic and entrepreneurial narratives become reinforced and valorized. It was a narrative/literary composition in which he bitterly lamented what would happen to the state of society and its moral culture if the entrepreneurial culture was thwarted. But Carnegie’s narrative was soon in danger of producing what might be described as a metonymic reduction.

By that I mean that in praising American nationalism Carnegie had to acknowledge the possibility of failure for the entrepreneur and through this reduction (of the heroic entrepreneur to one of failed entrepreneur) had a parallel for the American nation. As he said, “The Republic may not give wealth, or happiness; she has not promised these, it is the freedom to pursue these, not their realization, which the Declaration of Independence claims” (Carnegie, 1886: 32). Of course, being an entrepreneur can be risky business because it might lead to a tragic narrative emplotment – the ‘failure of the hero to control their environment’. But to maximize the avoidance of tragedy what the ‘Ideal Entrepreneur’ does is create a new ‘common sense’ where their values – and only their values – self-defined as harmony and consensus over making profits (which trickles down of course) become the basis of ‘the American narrative’. Heroes succeed when everyone understands and supports their narrative.

Further (or should it be ‘so’?), in Carnegie’s narrative only the entrepreneur-hero could produce social consensus because of his ‘talent for organisation and management’ (Carnegie, 1889a: 655). Of course the upshot was that such ability “invariably secures enormous rewards for its possessor” (Carnegie, 1889a: 655). This narrative is ideologically expedient as it implies that opposition to the corporation as a mode of wealth formation must be rejected because “the condition of the race is better” with this heroic entrepreneurial narrative (Carnegie, 1889a: 655). Only ‘the trust’ could secure social harmony.

So, anyone who found a reason to reject his analysis would be “attacking the foundation upon which civilization itself rests” (Carnegie, 1889a: 655). Perversely then, to attack the new
corporate state was to challenge heroic economic individualism. Carnegie’s heroism was narrated through the re-troping of the lives of heroic historical figures like Jefferson from a metonymic narrative with its conventional tragic emplotment, to what according to White’s model is a comic emplotment within the figurative mode of synecdoche whereby there is reconciliation between men that creates a more harmonized national culture – a triumphant democracy. So, for Carnegie the new industrial order had to be narrated (emplotted) to create a narrative of social harmony. The only thing (hitherto) missing from Carnegie’s final creation of the idealized entrepreneur-hero was the ultimate proof of the Gospel of Success. This was provided by his rationale for the ‘benefits’ of poverty – the well-known narrative of Ragged Dick.

So, in Hayden White’s narrative model the four arguments presented as modes of explanation are syllogisms. And, of course, their premises appeal to an authorially presumed causal relationship between events (White, 1973). Given my argument that Carnegie rejected a metonymic reduction favouring instead a synecdochic integration in his conceptualization of what constitutes the concept of difference, the explanatory ‘social laws’ he favoured were those that he believed denoted a move from a mechanistic to an organicist argument through which he accounted for the nature of American social change. We are all in this together despite the manifest variations in wealth. But he needed an outcome that sustained and valorized his worldview. And so, if you were poor it was (a) more than likely your own fault, and (b) in certain individual cases it could be viewed as a blessing; however, (c) there comes a point when the state needs to intervene. Although Carnegie believed that Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer were essentially correct (in the struggle for survival and adaptation to environment) he believed his ‘social corporatism’ could avoid social revolution from the left.

As he said in his book *Triumphant Democracy* ‘An aristocracy of wealth is impossible … Wealth cannot remain permanently in any class if economic laws are allowed free play’ (Carnegie, 1886: 366). So, for him Social Darwinism shaped a classless and democratic society. There was no need for class war and the struggle for existence could and should be mitigated. So, Carnegie dismissed the sociologist William Sumner’s narrative of a state of economic conflict induced by the unequal biological struggle for survival, and found unacceptable not only the philosopher’s biological Darwinism, but also the philosophy of Herbert Spencer favouring instead a shift to a form of social amelioration. So, ultimately the private administration of wealth – if done according to his principles – could create an organic ‘we are in this together’ society.

So in acknowledging the ruptures and fissures in ‘the past’ and ‘history’ connection which exist (because history is not derived from the past but fictively designed for it), this raises questions (a) about the ethical construction – and hence the management – of the past, and (b) how historians can/ought to narrate a responsible ‘creative accounting’ for the past. But in none of this is the empirical reality of the past injured in terms of justified belief unless (and usually only in creative and experimental historying) it furthers the pursuit of the wider understanding of the ‘nature of history’ as opposed to the empirical reality of ‘the past’.

This is, of course the really tricky bit in the exercise of confronting the nature of history given the epistemic (and cultural) priority we place on accurate empirical reporting. This act is done (a) in good faith, and (b) with the (rather odd?) belief that data carry within them their own given meaning, and hence (c) ‘experimental history’ like ‘experimental management narratives’ thus becomes not merely a pointless pursuit but probably a culturally dangerous act of folly. But then Hayden White pretty much demolished that argument by pointing to the existence of competing (narrative) explanations for exactly the same body of data. Management narratives are subject to the same ‘creative constraints’ as are all forms of narrative making.

Here I am not necessarily drawing what may seem to be a rather obvious analogy with ‘creative accounting’ and its practice(s). As I understand it ‘creative accounting practices’ stick to the
rules and regulations but they deviate from what ‘accepted standards’ aim to accomplish in terms of an accurate statement of the reality of the meaning of the accounts. The empirical data are narrated in such a way as to deliberately create a meaning which may be different to that which the accountant (one could substitute ‘historian’ for ‘accountant’) actually believes is the situation, the meaning, the reality, and/or the true explanation.

So, in a different definition of creative ‘accounting’ we ought to acknowledge the primary functioning of tropic imagination (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) with its strategies of explanation (emplotment, argument, and ideology). But it follows, as White has long argued, that we can reasonably accept that the attested data will regulate the historical explanation (i.e. the history’s narrative emplotment) only if the historian accepts that there must be a given story (i.e. emplotment = most likely meaning = most probable explanation) in the data sets. However, this belief is illogical (in my view) because that belief requires the historian to approve of (and give effect to) the idea that a specified set of (invariably highly complex and extensive) empirical data has only one (most probable?) explanation/meaning.

As is all too well known, a regression correlation coefficient that can be demonstrated between sets of data moving over time does not demonstrate ‘cause and effect’. To think it does requires a further odd multiple belief. This is the belief that (a) meaning inheres in the past, (b) that our only access to it (in terms of meaning) ‘as we narrate it’, has (c) no epistemic and (d) no ontological impact. Now I think something quite interesting follows if a ‘historical story’ is presented as a symbolic (metaphoric, metonymic, synecdochic, or ironic) representation of real events. What I think follows is that the question of its truthfulness must be both epistemologically and ontologically constrained by the principles governing our calculation of ‘the truth of the fictive’.

By fictive I refer to the fundamental nature of history. I argue that the ontology of history is that of a narrative created by the historian. So, if I am correct it is of central importance to understand the nature of the historian as an author-storyteller who creates ‘the-past-as-history’ (Munslow, 2012). So, rather than being a re(-)presentation of what once was, history is an authorial intercession that fictively represents the ‘past’ in the form of a ‘history’. It is entirely correct to claim that the nature of historying takes it beyond any spurious claims to scientistic and objective empirical-analytical-representationalism. While inference and plausible meaning can be divined this is not to be confused with ‘the truth of the past’ at any level beyond the statement of justified belief. So I argue that a history is a narrative discourse that is the construction of the historian. This is not to say the (hi)story is a made up fiction. The important point is that recognizing history is a fictive (not a fictional) cultural discourse takes it once and for all out of the category of practical realism with its epistemological security of history understood as an imitative if still interpretative report of ‘findings’.

Regardless of whether it is a management history narrative or any other kind (of history) every reader must try to detect not just the literary devices deployed but where the text escapes the control of the author and has become irrepressibly fictive. After reaching the not unreasonable assumption that the narrative has become ‘fugitive and fictive’ the deconstructionist reader must seek out (a) its ascendant trope, (b) the dominant emplotment defined through the power of ‘the hero’ to succeed/fail, (c) its core arguments (aka through the inference of the precise mechanics of cause and effect), and (d) what is the nature of its ideological/ethical implications. Deconstructing history must always have priority over the reconstruction of the past.

To deconstruct the management narrative necessitates exposing another confederacy. This is the unstated modernist complicity that exists between the ‘manager-historian’ and ‘the reader consumer’ whereby the former is presuming to and is presumed by the latter to be ‘telling truth about history’. By viewing the historian-manager as an author who is not only the constructor of ‘the-management-past-as-history’, but who is also fashioned by and in language, I hope we
Alun Munslow

can see that it is not the past that speaks through the manager–historian, but only the typescript’s fictive nature and the ethic/ideology of the author. Not even managers exist outside (their) discourse. If they could then they would have (a) discovered the basis upon which the knowing subject is constructed and (b) demonstrated beyond any possible doubt the modernist conviction that individual consciousness is the fount of knowledge, meaning, and understanding. However, our (once called postmodern) narratively self-conscious and multi-sceptical condition requires that the manager-as-author must be decentred. This also suggests there is no transcendental signified.

This recognition in no way debilitates managers – or anyone else for that matter – from making decisions. It just makes understanding their nature more complex. For this I make no apology. You will recall that the brief for my chapter was to examine current debates in and on the nature of that narrative we call history that might inform management and organization studies. So, by deploying perhaps the most famous entrepreneur–author Andrew Carnegie I have endeavoured to examine how ‘postmodern’ or (as I prefer to call them) multi-sceptical arguments have confronted the self-styled practical, realist, common-sense investment in and defence of empiricism, analysis, and representationalism. While this triad remains the basis of ‘common sense thinking and practice’ it is seriously flawed and should only be used with extreme caution when managing the past or endeavouring to learn from it – as history.

Notes

1 See, for as good a start as any, Russell (1954, 1957). It should be noted – but it still rarely is – that Russell also assumes history is essentially narrative in form. Most (in)famous is, of course, White (1973). Perhaps of equal importance is White’s (1966) article. The Keith Jenkins oeuvre of multi-scepticism concerning the utility of history understood in empirical-analytical-representationalist terms is also well illustrated in his (2009) collection. The historians who predated White are referenced in his classic text but obviously include Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood. Unavoidably the literature on the sometimes called ‘linguistic turn’ that acknowledged the frailty of our access to reality outside language is substantial. See for example Gallie (1964); Mink (1978); Munz (1997); White (2000); Ankersmit (1994, 2001, 2005) and most recently (2012); Jenkins (1991, 1999); Jenkins and Munslow (2004); Ricoeur (1984).

More specifically on the universality of the structure of narrative and from which historians could usefully learn much that applies to their own literary endeavours see Chatman (1978); Jakobson (1966, 1985); Propp (1958); Genette (1986, 1990); Greimas (1992); Todorov (1964); Ricoeur (1984).

2 The published work on management narratives and narrative making is extensive. See for example: Kilduff and Mehr (1997); Barry and Elme (1997); Boje, Oswick, and Ford (2004); Klein, Connell, and Meyer (2007); Martens, Jennings, and Jennings (2007); Langenohl (2008); Bartel and Garud (2009).

3 The classic ‘figure’ is Ragged Dick. See Vlahakis (1979).

References


Managing the past


