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Critical hermeneutics for critical organizational history

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Introduction: presences and absences

The history of hermeneutics as a term and as a practice is long and fascinating. Few methods, methodologies, or epistemologies can boast longer or more complex roots. The idea first surfaces at the beginnings of institutional intellectual life, in the city states of southern Europe and their philosophical academies. It continues more or less uninterruptedly with “many surprising twists and turns” (Porter and Robinson 2011: 1) to its present-day position within academic philosophy departments and in social science or humanities research methodology teaching. Hermeneutics is usually described as a two-level practice: as a way of approaching the ‘first order’ task of reading for understanding, and as a ‘second order’ way of thinking about the human interpretation of texts. This can be seen as an implicit hierarchy, in that the first aspect of being a ‘hermeneut’ is a method, while the second aspect is epistemological and/or ontological. The latter became the dominant meaning associated with the term during the twentieth century when hermeneutics was framed as a central concern of critical and post-philosophes, bringing it into the philosophical mainstream from the theological and historical and considerably expanding its range as a way of thinking.

However, despite this recent academic reincorporation and the popularity of critical and post-epistemologies in business schools, there appear to be very few self-identified hermeneuts writing about management and organizations in English. As an analytical method, hermeneutic methodologies are established as a rarity (Prasad and Mir, 2002); as a means of framing empirical approaches to data collection, they are equally unusual (Phillips and Brown, 1993). The reasons for this are unclear, perhaps unknowable. Practicalities such as slow and piecemeal translation of key texts into English and discomfort with the politics of key German figures in hermeneutics’ twentieth-century philosophical development are sometimes cited (Murray, 2008). Academic micro-politics may also be significant; hermeneutics’ evident neglect might be related to its adoption by medieval theologians in debates as to the ‘true’ meaning of (especially) biblical texts, and then its more recent association with the humanities generally, two faculties on campus that organization and management researchers tend to walk around or through without looking up (Gagliardi and Czarniawskwa, 2006; Sørensen et al., 2012) in pursuit of methodological and analytic legitimacy from more ‘scientific’ disciplines (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). However the lack
of hermeneuts and hermeneuticians is even more surprising when we consider that it is “one of the two major philosophical-conceptual underpinnings of interpretive approaches to the study of organizations” (Yanow and Ybema, 2009: 40). These authors also note the conventional focus in hermeneutic approaches on text, broadly understood to include visual texts such as film. This may be another clue to the low profile of the approach, in that collection and analysis of either primary or secondary textual data in this form is relatively unusual in organization and management studies (Stablein, 1996).

When we also consider that hermeneutics is perhaps the historical method par excellence, its relatively low profile as method and as epistemology within management and organization history becomes even more baffling. A clue to its absence here may lie in its assumption or incorporation into historical studies — in other words, it may be implicitly present, assumed to such a degree that it can remain unspoken. However, it is also possible that hermeneutics’ absence indicates less of an implicit presence, and more of an explicit exclusion. There are certainly few of the methodological discussions that would be expected as indicators of a significant method and methodology in review and summary contributions to journals or edited handbooks, and hermeneutics is rarely held up as the way of working that underpins the analyses produced in the name of management and organizational histories.

These presences and absences are the central concern of and reason for this chapter. I explore hermeneutics as method, as well as hermeneutics as both methodology and epistemology. I do this by considering the presence of hermeneutics in organization studies as a synchronic approach that focuses on one moment in time, but also by examining its potential as a diachronic approach that enables a specific historiography of organization and management, institutions as well as individuals. Throughout, I emphasize that hermeneutics is a term that signifies philosophical commitment, and acts as an indicator of how data collection and analysis were carried out. Each implies the other, but each also carries its own meanings, history, and expectations separately from the other. The purpose of the chapter is to locate hermeneutics in its sense as an interpretivist organization studies perspectival schema (Yanow and Ybema, 2009), with the intention of pointing up its potentials and problematics as a way of writing management and organizational histories.

Contemporary practices: hermeneutics, texts, and communication

Although the volume of hermeneutic analysis is low in management and organization studies generally, its presence often indicates original and insightful analysis. Researchers working with a hermeneutic approach are inevitably closely engaged with fundamental issues of explanation, understanding, and language. In addition, all hermeneuticians are at least aware of the complex dialogues, or dialectics, between and among text, author, reader, and interpreter/analyst.

This reflects hermeneutics’ remarkably strong presence in philosophy and philosophically informed discussions of social science research methods. Indeed, there is an argument to support the claim that hermeneutics has framed the development of modern philosophy from the period when Kant was writing in the eighteenth century (Porter and Robinson, 2011). This means the primary literature associated with it is vast, difficult if not impossible to survey unless a lifetime’s work is devoted to it. Good secondary overviews to aid selective engagement with primary texts are fortunately plentiful, often with a specific disciplinary perspective built into the exposition.

One such disciplinary overview is provided by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000, chapter 2). They suggest hermeneutics can be understood as a ‘bridge’ (2000: 52) between empiricist qualitative research, such as grounded theory or ethnomethodology, and more ideologically led critical perspectives, such as the Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt School and later the
philosophical anthropology of Jürgen Habermas. They sub-divide the community of hermeneuticians into objectivist and ‘alethic’. The first, according to Alvesson and Sköldberg, is in pursuit of comprehension of underlying meaning, while the second seeks explanatory theory that may involve causal connections. As these authors also note, there is a significant fault-line between the two groups in their attitude towards subject–object distinctions. Objectivist hermeneuts retain a “studying subject” who stands apart from a “studied object” (2000: 56) in the hope of establishing a transcendental meaning–truth, while alethic analysts seek to provide a provisional, intersubjective, plausible agreement about the meaning of a text and how to understand it.

These approaches are supplemented by a more recent philosophical development which sails under the flag of critical hermeneutics. Contributions to this branch of hermeneutics usually cite the philosophical discussions of both Habermas and Ricoeur as foundational, particularly the latter, especially when considering critical hermeneutics as a method of inquiry and knowledge production (e.g. Thompson, 1981). Perhaps the primary attraction of critical hermeneutics, in the form presented by Thompson in particular, is its clarity of methodological guidance in the approach to data analysis. This may reflect the debt to Ricoeur, whose work often presents extremely complex discussions in very clearly structured ways, with surprisingly practical guidance (see, for example, Ricoeur (2004) on memory, hermeneutics, forgetting, and historiography).

Thompson’s arguments and guidance are manifest in the structure and content of a landmark critical hermeneutic study of organizational communication, published in 1993 by Nelson Phillips and John Brown. They make a strong argument for the use of a critical hermeneutic approach to understanding organizational communication. They relate this to the cultural and symbolic turn in management and organization studies, especially the ‘management of meaning’ as an expression of power relations. Their main interest is in understanding how organizational members’ and interested outsiders’ understandings of an organization may be conditioned by texts. This also involves interrogating the textual sources — in other words, asking who produced the text and what their motives might be. The analytical methods, they suggest, are varied: structural semiotics, psychoanalytics, discourse analysis, Marxist analysis, and other interpretative methods aimed at understanding organizational cultures.

However, the critical hermeneutic approach outlined in this important contribution also limits its reach by excluding subjective meanings attached or attributed to texts. The texts that Phillips and Brown (1993: 1549, fn. 1) want to subject to critical hermeneutic analysis must be ‘objectified’ and ‘abstracted’ from their context. This may be a product of their focus on culture-as-communication, so that the lived experience of the symbolic socially negotiated everyday order of organization is excluded. Culture is limited, perhaps reduced, to a system of texts through which people structure and interpret everyday organizational life. They therefore place their approach firmly within Alvesson and Sköldberg’s objectivist hermeneutics, with its focus on understanding rather than explanation and theory building.

The social context of the texts is acknowledged; however, it is present only in its more structured forms as hierarchy, control, micro-political coalitions, domination and resistance (in other words, in abstracted objectified forms). Based on their ontological position on culture, and their reading of Thompson’s work (1981, 1990), Phillips and Brown frame critical hermeneutic analysis as a means of engaging with five aspects of text: intentional, referential, contextual, conventional, and structural. Each of these ways of reading and interpreting guides the hermeneut towards specific questions:

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- What do texts refer to outside themselves in order to communicate?
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• What is the social and historical context of the text’s production?
• What are the social conventions that the text’s production and consumption reproduce or challenge?
• What are the structural conventions that the text follows or challenges?

This is then related to a base of critical hermeneutic philosophy that is founded on the work of a key contributor to both hermeneutics and historiography, Paul Ricoeur. A framework of interpretative ‘moments’ is outlined, to guide the researcher through social-historical analysis of the first three aspects of the text, followed by formal analysis to engage with the latter two, and then interpretation/reinterpretation to bring them together into a new authoritative analytical text.

The most important moment, analytically, is the third, which is an uncertain synthetic process that involves the “creative construction of meaning” (Phillips and Brown, 1993: 1568) to be justified or legitimated through the skill of the interpreter and assessment of how convincing the previous two moments are. This is important to be clear about because it is the key shift in all forms of hermeneutic analysis, from testimony (using Ricoeur’s term) to an authoritative representation of events, people, and artefacts, something I return to later.

Prasad and Mir (2002) utilize a similar method and methodology, to explore the same empirical context of the oil industry. Their version of critical hermeneutics as method and methodology is, however, subtly different. First, Prasad and Mir focus much more on reading and interpreting symbols and symbolic meanings in corporate communication. Second, they employ a more ideological critique, in a political sense, of the texts they examine. Third, they devote more energy to conceptual development through their hermeneutic analysis. These differences allow Prasad and Mir to develop a much more rounded understanding of the relationship between text and context which is not entirely dependent on the researcher and her interpretation. The context here can be social and cultural, but it is also highly politicized and (importantly for this chapter) intrinsically historical.

In this sense, Prasad and Mir’s work is more implicitly theorized as a hermeneutic approach than Phillips and Brown’s. They engage with the idea of representation in the texts they objectify, but also in the objective text they themselves produce through their hermeneutic analysis. To use Ricoeur’s (2004) terms again, Prasad and Mir acknowledge the epistemological and aesthetic aspects of hermeneutics to create a dialectic between text and theory, such that their analysis has both narrative intelligibility and explanatory intelligibility. It has, in short, a plot as well as a style.

These two empirical studies are important because they are clear about the hermeneutic imagination involved in reading, interpreting, and theorizing. They are critically reflexive in the sense that they are philosophically and methodologically explicit as to the position and role of the researcher-as-author (Fournier and Grey, 2000). This is both epistemological (especially for Phillips and Brown) and political (especially for Prasad and Mir). Neither would be read as historical in the conventional sense that management and organization history usually works to. However, both give clear indications of the promise of hermeneutic analysis, as epistemology and as explanatory/theoretical. For this promise to be more fully realized, within management and organization history as well as in organization studies more broadly, careful examination of its implications is necessary. I do this in the next section, through a reading of a foundational methodological statement of what a hermeneutic approach looks like and enables, followed by an outline of what it might mean for management and organizational history, particularly a critical version of that way of seeing.
The promises of hermeneutic analysis

As Prasad (2002: 12) observes, there was a “hermeneutic ferment” in organization studies for a brief period in the 1990s when cultural and symbolic perspectives came to prominence. However, as he goes on to argue, the epistemological implications of claiming the label of hermeneut were largely unexamined. His aim is to address that by putting together the most philosophically complete account of hermeneutics we have within management and organization studies.

Prasad structures his review through the binary of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ hermeneutics. The former is rather dismissively described as “somewhat nebulous” (2002: 13) and a rather inaccurate shorthand for qualitative or interpretative research. ‘Strong’ hermeneutics, on the other hand, engages with philosophical discussions of the term and its implications. The complex historical development of philosophical hermeneutics is described by Prasad as a three-stage process. First, scholars spoke of hermeneutic analysis as a way to frame debate over the contested meanings of ‘difficult’ texts – in other words, hermeneutics could be brought out of the cupboard as a practice when scholars (especially theologians) needed to establish their legitimacy and authority as interpreters of the true intent or motive of the speaker/writer. This highly specific use and usage was widened both by theological shifts, such as Protestantism’s challenge to hierarchies of biblical interpretation, and by closely related developments in the philosophy of language and communication.

Classical hermeneutics then slowly transforms into what Prasad terms “philosophical hermeneutics”, mostly through the efforts of German philosophers working in what would become defined as the European period of romanticism and idealism. This is the period in which hermeneutics is extended in two important ways. First, it becomes gradually but steadily disassociated from theology, to take a place at the epistemological table as a secularized way of thinking about reality, humanity, and the world we live in. Second, the ‘objects’ that hermeneuts can apply their ontology and epistemology to in order to interpret the world, expand beyond written texts to systems and processes of communication.

This second key period of hermeneutics’ progress through academic disciplines/disciplining brings it well into the twentieth century (and the problematic politics of Europe in the first half of that time, especially for those working in German universities). According to Prasad (2002), there is both a philosophical and a methodological aspect to the writing on hermeneutics from this period. Philosophically, hermeneutics as understanding is re-categorized from an epistemology to an ontology. In other words, the pursuit of understanding that hermeneutics has always been centrally concerned with is conceptualized as ontological, a basic condition of human experience and therefore of humanity and the world. Methodologically, hermeneutics is also repositioned, as the separation and therefore mutual autonomy of text-as-object and interpretation-as-act are questioned. This in turn breaks down the methodological distinction between understanding and interpretation, a second significant issue that we return to later in the chapter.

The third moment described by Prasad, critical hermeneutics, is that which is claimed by both Phillips and Brown (1993) and Prasad and Mir (2002). It involves a commitment, of some kind, to the possibility of a critical theory of society and therefore organizations and management. This has two key implications: first, it helps the hermeneut to avoid (charges of) relativism; and second, it reintroduces transcendental reason (perhaps in the form of social theory) as a means of resolving the inevitable conflicts produced by competing hermeneutic readings of texts.

It is this debate that brought hermeneutics to the attention of a series of mid- and late twentieth-century philosophers, ensuring its presence in accounts of, for example, critical theory,
deconstruction, pragmatism, psychoanalytics, and their various combinations. Most contributors to these debates engaged with the tension created when hermeneutics is discussed as ontology and epistemology (or methodology). This is in part an attempt to resolve, or deflect, the issue of relativism, and therefore also retain the possibility of a progressive politics (of society and therefore also of organization and management).

Following this abbreviated historical overview, Prasad’s (2002) methodological account then sets out what he sees as key issues that any aspiring contemporary ‘hermeneutician’ ought to consider. These are the hermeneutic circle, historicality (including the ‘hermeneutic horizon’), dialogical understanding, the role of the author-as-interpreter, and critique. I want to concentrate here on the idea of historicality, especially in its methodological implications, for obvious reasons, but the other issues are worth examining briefly as they can be seen as significant in approaching hermeneutics.

The idea of the hermeneutic circle is relatively easily articulated. It describes the belief that an understanding of textual meaning (the desired outcome of practising hermeneutics) can only be achieved through consideration of ‘parts’ (individual experiences or interpretations) and ‘whole’ (a sense of context, perhaps analysed as place, time, or culture). This process should happen as a circle or ‘spiral’ (Porter and Robinson 2011: 41) rather than an exchange or dialogue, such that understanding increases as the two aspects of hermeneutic practice happen repeatedly over a period of time.

The pursuit of such an understanding raises the possibility that understanding is achieved through a conversation that takes place between interpreter and text. This may be understood as similar to the practice of authorial or researcher reflexivity, in which the preconceptions, prejudices, and situated nature of analysis are acknowledged. As always, however, the hermeneutician is encouraged to aspire to the pursuit and capture of truth – in other words, this is not a post-structural or postmodern reflexivity, but a delimited one that maintains authorial positioning.

The notion of authorial intention inevitably has to be considered alongside the pursuit of understanding through working within the hermeneutic circle. If the text being interpreted is defined as carrying or communicating multiple meanings, then the authorial interpretation, as a text, must also be understood in the same way. Authorial intention may be present, but it does not, cannot, determine readerly understanding or interpretation. The final issue, critique, contains a remarkably complex debate within the philosophical community as to the relationship between understanding and critique. At issue is the status of language, whether it is ontological or epiphenomenal, and therefore liable to alteration and/or degradation through other social practices. From this, the question of whether the status of text and interpretation may be differentiated arises, so that, for example, critique (especially political or ideological) may be possible – or not, as perhaps hermeneutics is limited to interpretation.

This last issue and the debate it generated drew in someone concerned with hermeneutics as a practice and philosophy that inflected various parts of his life. Paul Ricoeur wrote throughout his life across a range of academic disciplines (philosophy, theology, history), and his arguments and hermeneutic frameworks have been taken up in many others. Ricoeur suggested that critique is in fact integral to hermeneutic analysis. However, it is Ricoeur’s contribution to the interplay of hermeneutics and historiography that is the subject of the next section of this chapter, especially its implications for the historical or historicizing analysis of management and organization via hermeneutic thinking.

The possibility of hermeneutic histories

A number of biographers provide details of Ricoeur’s long and remarkable life (e.g. Reagan, 1996). It is only important in the context of this chapter to note that he wrote as a philosopher,
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historian, Christian, socialist, and historiographer. In many of his works, he engaged in parti-
cular with philosophical considerations of the ontological, and therefore epistemological, status
of text and language. This in turn would lead Ricoeur to consider the status of the written
text-dominated archive materials that so many management and organization historians rely on.
Throughout his philosophical and historiographical writings, Ricoeur maintained a commit-
ment to working with phenomenology and hermeneutics as key to understanding the human
condition and the knowledge we seek to produce about it through histories.

Like MacIntyre in subsequent works (e.g. MacIntyre, 1982), Ricoeur’s philosophical writings
are unusual in that he is always interested in the human subject of the most abstract philosoph-
ical and existential issues. He makes this interest material through a ‘philosophical anthropolog-
y, similar but different to grounding the complexities of key themes such as will, freedom, and evil
in the experience of everyday embodied action that anthropologists such as Geertz might prac-
tise.3 However, Ricoeur insisted that the status of language and interpretation was central to his
philosophy, thereby inevitably taking a “hermeneutical turn” (Porter and Robinson 2011: 111).
In this period of his working life, Ricoeur brought together a number of existing philosophical
interests to explore the nature of the human and social sciences as disciplines. This brought him
into a long relationship with text and understanding. Ricoeur’s work is also marked by an abid-
ing concern with narrative over time – in other words, concerns that are (should be) central to
history, historicizing, and considering historiography.

These are exceptionally deep waters, all the more so because while Ricoeur was working in
the French philosophical tradition with its particular conventions, he also sought to commen-
tate on (and challenge) German, North American, and English understandings in these fields.
However, there is one statement of the implications of Ricoeur’s development of hermeneutics
on history that summarizes and (to some extent) clarifies in an operational sense helpful for
practising history in relation to specific categories of life (such as organization or management).
It is his final major work, published in English in 2004 as Memory, History, Forgetting.

This book has three stated aims for the author. There is a private purpose, as he comes towards
the end of life with a desire to think about the maintenance or degradation of memory as the
median level between temporal experience and narrative. Second, Ricoeur wants to contribute
to the debate surrounding what he sees as the fundamental methodological and philosophical
problematic facing historians in their work – the relationship between memory, remember-
ing/forgetting, and (the production of) history. Finally, he sees the act of writing this book as a
civic duty, to encourage us all to think about how and why some events, people, or places are
celebrated or forgotten, at the end of what had been a century of unprecedented physical and
ideological violence.

Thus the first part of the book explores memory. This may be read as a minor concern, more
biological than social scientific, simply laying the foundation for subsequent discussions of his-
tory’s epistemologies and the hermeneutics of the historical condition. However, in a wonder-
fully evocative metaphor, Ricoeur suggests that each of his three overarching concerns may be
seen as a mast on a ship, and that history needs to maintain all three masts to operate effectively.
If we wish to think about the past, to write about it, to research it, or to talk about it, we are
inevitably representing it. History, then, is not a discipline, a craft, or a thing – rather, history is
understood here as a process of remembering, forgetting, and imaginative construction of the
“presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior” (Ricoeur, 2004: xvi).

Hence it becomes clear why this particular hermeneutics of historiography has to begin
then with an examination of how the building blocks of any history come to be. Memories are
examined for what they are, and whose they are. This leads into consideration of a fault-line
that is fundamental to historians, the distinction between truth and imagination, or mimesis
and imagination. Memories are always dysfunctional in a realist sense; they can never hope to represent what happened completely or entirely reliably. However, if the analyst, or hermeneut, exercises the critical agency available to her, then memories are recognized more for their truthful ambition and insight. Memories become excellent and informative data sources, more or less effective efforts to recall that are analysed through an actively reflexive phenomenology of memory that leads towards a historiography and history.

The exploration of memory is only the first section of this remarkable book. Ricoeur goes on to examine the implications of taking memory seriously for an epistemological understanding of history, and thence a critical and ontological perspective on the historical condition, culminating on reflections on the position of history as a contributor or barrier to human happiness. Here, Ricoeur returns to his ruminative starting point, considering the nature and purpose of (his) life, history, and historiography. His conclusion is clear: history can only contribute to the pursuit of a good life, good lives, if its practitioners and consumers strive for reflexivity in the understanding that ‘it’ is always provisional, open to reconsideration, and engaged.

These are potentially very abstract arguments and conclusions, especially for a notionally applied field of research such as management and organization studies. The concluding comments bring this discussion of hermeneutics back towards critical organizational history to reconsider that activity in the light of hermeneutics’ promises, as method, methodology, epistemology, and ontology.

**Concluding comments: bringing hermeneutics into critical historical analysis**

As this chapter shows, hermeneutics is not an exclusively historical method, methodology, or way of thinking. It has long had a presence in philosophy and theology, most obviously, but it can also be identified as a strand of thought in linguistic and literary theory. Hermeneutics is, however, intrinsically historicized, in the sense that it is a temporal “hybrid of that which is, that which came before, and that which is becoming” (Porter and Robinson 2011: 303). While we may not all agree that being a hermeneut is unavoidable because all research is based on understanding and interpreting (Porter and Robinson 2011), there is a strong argument for scholars in management and organization history in particular to pay it more attention as ontology, epistemology, methodology, and way of seeing. The characterization of hermeneutics as a narrow discipline oriented towards finding the underlying truth of a text is very misleading. Hermeneutics is much better seen, especially from the early twentieth century on, as a way of asking questions – questions about meaning, interrogating the production and reception of social or cultural texts in a very broad sense, without necessarily finding a truth or resolving disagreements about meaning.

This way of approaching the interpretation of data is obviously both useful and challenging for a historically inclined researcher. Its use lies in the historical sensitivity that practising hermeneutics inevitably encourages, its centrality to the historical conditions that we all occupy as we make both history and histories (see Ricoeur, 2004: part 3, chapter 2). Interpretation, understanding, and argument are all enabled by a hermeneutic approach to the texts that historians build narrative on or around. An understanding of hermeneutics as an ontological position implies an approach to being human, and therefore to research, as inevitably historically conditioned (Ricoeur, 2004). The past is not a place, or even a moment, but an aspect of the temporality of being.

Such an understanding of hermeneutics, however, has implications for the objects of history. If, as Ricoeur has repeatedly argued, history is an ontological presence (in other words, that being historical is a condition rather than an option that can be ignored), then both
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history-as-data and history-as-product have to be seen in a particular light. To start with Ricoeур’s (2004: 448) words: “The idea of an exhaustive narrative is a performatively impossible idea … one can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action … the prime danger … lies in the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history – or official history.” These two issues are especially salient for historians of organization and management. The temptation of adapting the performed historical narrative in the published history to gain access to corporate archives is always present (Evans, 2012).

However, it seems most likely that if hermeneutics is to be accorded a place in critical organizational history, it is as a methodology related to interpretivism. Yanow and Ybema propose, playfully but with serious intent, four “takes on the position of interpretivism in organization studies” (2009: 41). These are pluralists, revolutionaries, warriors, and peacemakers. Each label is described through five characteristics, the first two in relation to ‘other’ methods and methodologies: how interpretivism’s position is understood, its identity position, its methods, its contributions, and its limitations. Through this scheme Yanow and Ybema argue convincingly that interpretative research is more often presented as a set of ideals than honoured in practice, as method or methodology.

I conclude by suggesting that hermeneutics, in all of its variety, richness, and inquisitiveness, offers a uniquely generative means of asking more and better questions of management and organization histories in an idealistic sense, that may be translated effectively into practice-based methodologies that underpin convincing historiography and historical narratives. In this respect, its neglect is something that historical researchers should feel contrition about, and begin to redress.

Notes

1 It’s worth noting the presence of hermeneutics in two well-regarded management, business, and organization history journals. Business History provides five references for ‘hermeneutic’, two to full papers that mention the term once, in its 56-year publishing history; Management and Organizational History shows 13 uses of the term in papers from its nine volumes. The former is surprising; the latter might be read as encouraging.

2 Unusually, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) use the terms Critical Theory and critical hermeneutics interchangeably. Although a number of philosophers associated with Critical Theory perspectives engage closely with hermeneutics, I read that as a necessary condition of philosophical work in the twentieth century, not an indication that the two approaches are the same.

3 Geertz’s debt to Ricoeur’s writing on hermeneutics is noted by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 95–8), as are the differences between Geertz’s approach to cultural analysis and Ricoeur’s hermeneutic frames.

References