Mothership reconnection

Microhistory and institutional work compared

Stephanie Decker

Introduction

The marketplace for historical research in business schools is currently split into two camps: business history (BH) and management and organizational history (MOH). This separation shows most clearly in the Routledge Companion series, in which the present volume on MOH is published alongside the one on BH. The ideological and epistemological lines have been most clearly (and combatively) drawn in an exchange in the journal Management and Organizational History between Scott Taylor, Emma Bell and Bill Cooke (2009) and the then editors of Business History, John Wilson and Steve Toms (2010). Ostensibly a discussion whether the work of Paul Ricoeur, specifically Memory, History, Forgetting (2004), should be central for the historiographical practice of business historians, the articles are largely positioning exercises between the constructivist epistemology of the more relativist MOH community, and the objectivist epistemology of the more empiricist business historians. While the lines of this conflict are somewhat overdrawn, as neither camp is entirely as homogeneous as the above implies, it has also been overtaken by new work in recent years. Business historians have begun to heed the call of Taylor et al. to reflect more on their practice (Bucheli and Wadhani, 2014; Decker, 2013; Fellman and Popp, 2013; Hansen, 2012; Schwarzkopf, 2012), while some recent publications suggest that historical approaches might be emerging from their marginal position within management and organization studies (Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014).

In one of the foundational articles in MOH, Clark and Rowlinson (2004: 331) argue that an ‘historic turn’ in organization studies would imply a greater engagement with historical values of context and process, rather than with the adjacent branch of history. This argument has been reiterated by scholars such as Andrew Popp (2009). By turning towards history as a discipline, historical researchers are seeking a re-connection to the disciplinary ‘mothership’ as the basis for their work in management studies. Recently, Popp has called for an ‘historic turn’ in BH specifically, which he argues needs to combine the writing of excellent history with greater reflexivity about historical research practices.¹ I would argue that a ‘historiographic turn’ is required, by which I mean a consideration of historiography as a repository of historical theory. This is in distinction to Taylor, Bell, and Cooke’s reference to the philosophy of history, or Toms and Wilson’s suggestion that historians ought to engage with social science theory. Theoretical concerns are
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embedded in the practice, explanations, and narrativization of historical research, and different historical traditions have differed in how far they make these explicit. Thus when it comes to making a theoretical contribution, historical researchers are faced with a very unequal marketplace for concepts and theories, where little is derived from historiography other than empirics, context, and in the best case some epistemological concerns.

However, if we consider history as a disciplinary body of knowledge (German and other continental European languages usefully distinguish between Geschichte and Geschichtswissenschaft, i.e. the past and the study of the past) we can draw on a variety of epistemological and theoretical positions, even though these are elaborated differently from the social sciences. These range from the more relativist positions in cultural history, specifically approaches that focus on ‘usable pasts’ such as those found in gender history (LaRossa, 1997; Lerner, 1994; Jacobitti, 2000), to the enduring base of empiricist history, as defended by Richard Evans (1999), but also contain objectivist yet theory-driven varieties such as economic history. Finally, and most importantly in my opinion, there are varieties of constructivist history that are not relativist in nature, such as aspects of microhistory and postcolonial history. I believe that these harbour opportunities to reassess the role of historical research in organization studies.

In order to illustrate how I think this might be achieved, this chapter will outline a comparison between microhistory and an area of organization theory that appears concerned with similar analytical issues, institutional work (IW). Both the similarities as much as the differences between the interests and methodological statements of the leading Italian microhistorians of the 1980s and 1990s, and the scholarly communities that emerged around issues of institutional entrepreneurship and IW since the mid-2000s, offer potentially interesting avenues for interdisciplinary work for MOH. While it is not unusual for historical research to draw on organization theory (OT), for example Anteby and Molnár (2012), Decker (2010), and Leblebici et al. (1991), it is less common to suggest that historical researchers in organization studies actually have recourse to a rich body of conceptual frameworks embedded within historiography, provided that they are prepared to ‘overcome the rift’ between the two camps (Greenwood and Bernardi, 2014).

Comparing institutional work and microhistory

On the face of it IW and microhistory are scholarly traditions that have emerged at very different times and in very different disciplines, with research subjects that could not be more dissimilar: on the one hand, we find the careful analysis of the practices and political moves of organizational members to create, maintain, or disrupt a theoretical construct known as an institution. An institution here is defined so broadly that it effortlessly contains almost anything that a historian would refer to as structures, culture, discourse, rules, and belief systems. From the perspective of historians, it is important to note that the idea of an institution encompasses phenomena that could be classified as social as well as cultural. Thus while many institutional theorists have become concerned with how individuals can retain the ability to act in the face of cognitively totalizing institutions, they rarely consider their immensely totalizing a priori definition of the concept itself.

On the other hand, we are faced with a diverse body of historical work that has mostly focused on early modern rural communities and individuals living in these communities, who at some point in time became known to the authorities (and were thus recorded for posterity) because they disrupted the status quo by having publicly diverged from acceptable belief systems. Early Italian, and to some extent French, microhistorians have often relied on the records of the Inquisition, an organization in which well-educated members of an intellectual elite adjudicated
the misconceptions and deviations from the true faith of more marginal and powerless urban as well as rural artisans, millers and farmers. In terms of the IW literature, this directly addresses issues of disrupting and maintaining institutions, but it does so in settings and with a methodological toolkit which is hardly known in organization studies.

One can easily continue to list the many ways in which these literatures are not only dissimilar, but also at a complete disconnect from each other, but there are also some interesting and largely underappreciated parallels. For the purpose of this chapter, microhistory will make reference to the original Italian microstoria, with its strong focus on ethnography (whilst maintaining a critical distance to Clifford Geertz’s ideas). There are two reasons why microhistory appears to be a particularly fruitful historical tradition to explore for institutional theorists. Firstly, if one considers the position within their respective disciplines, microhistory and IW make very similar claims, and seek to challenge commonly held assumptions: microhistorians criticized the type of macro-social enquiry in social history that was prominently (though not exclusively) promoted by the French Annales school. In one of the earliest programmatic statements, Ginzburg and Poni (1979) suggested that Italy had been subject to a highly unequal exchange in the historiographic marketplace for ideas, but that microhistorical methodology might help to redress the balance. In a similar move, the IW literature has criticized the increasingly restrictive core concepts of institutional isomorphism, organizational fields, and institutional logics that have become central to institutional theory as a macro-theory of organizations.

Secondly, microhistory distinguishes itself from many other historical traditions by discussing its methodology and its theoretical influences and intentions quite clearly, unusual for historians. It shares this more methodological discourse with other historical specializations, such as postcolonial history, which is an important prerequisite for interdisciplinary research as it has the potential to make this type of historical research more accessible. Table 16.1 summarizes some of these similarities in the research programs of IW and microhistory. In fact, as a historian reading the opening paragraph of Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca (2011), it seemed to almost recall the intense historiographical debates of the 1970s and 1980s in which the dominance of the macro-social model, based on quantitative ‘serial history’ (Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014) was challenged by what became known later as the ‘cultural turn’, which encompasses a variety of approaches including microhistory as well as poststructural history (Cook, 2012).

\[T\]hese core concepts – such as institutionalization, institutional change, and institutional logics – have focused attention on the macrodynamics of fields – the processes through which large-scale social and economic changes occur. Somewhat lost in the development of an institutional perspective has been the lived experience of organizational actors, especially the connection between this lived experience and the institutions that structure and are structured by it.

(\textit{Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2011: 52})

Compare this to the following statement by Georg Iggers, a German historiographer, who describes the sensibilities of the leading Italian microhistorians thus:

\[M\]icrohistory is an extension and not a repudiation of older social science history, a rediscovery of culture and the individuality of persons and small groups as agents of historical change … Their key argument against social science approaches to history was that such history deprived the past of its qualitative aspects and left it without a human face…. they rejected the preoccupation of the social sciences with anonymous structures and processes.

(\textit{Iggers, 2005: 112, 116})
Table 16.1 Comparing the research objectives of institutional work and microhistory

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<th>Institutional work</th>
<th>Microhistory</th>
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<td><strong>Is a response to</strong></td>
<td>– Institutional Theory</td>
<td>– Social science history</td>
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<td><strong>Challenges commonly held assumptions such as</strong></td>
<td>– Focus on macro-social processes at the expense of the individual lived experience</td>
<td>– Focus on macro-social processes at the expense of the individual lived experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>– Specifically concepts such as organizational fields, institutional isomorphism, and institutionalization</td>
<td>– Specifically modernization theory and other deterministic conceptions of progress such as in historical materialism</td>
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<td><strong>Aims to</strong></td>
<td>– Bring the individual back into analysis and theory</td>
<td>– Bring the individual back into historical analysis</td>
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<td>– Link action and institution through individuals as well as distributed agency</td>
<td>– Investigate the agency of marginalized individuals vis- à - vis more powerful social actors</td>
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<td>– Investigate complex and equivocal responses to institutional frameworks</td>
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Overarching research objective

Show how individuals can act and influence larger structures, or reinterpret them in ways that are personally meaningful

The similarities between the two research orientations perhaps become even clearer if one considers a programmatic statement by one of the leading microhistorians in the social history tradition, Giovanni Levi:

Their work has always centred on the search for a more realistic description of human behaviour, employing an action and conflict model of man’s behaviour in the world [emphasis added] which recognizes his – relative – freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems. Thus all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms. The question is, therefore, how to define the margins – however narrow they may be – of the freedom granted an individual by the interstices and contradictions of the normative systems which govern him.

(Levi, 1991: 94)

If one replaced Levi’s reference to ‘normative systems’ with institutions, the contemporary writings on IW appear almost like an echo of the concerns that drove Italian microhistorians:

Missing from such grand accounts of institutions and agency are the myriad, day-to-day equivocal instances of agency that, although aimed at affecting the institutional order, represent a complex melange of forms of agency – successful and not, simultaneously radical and conservative, strategic and emotional, full of compromise, and rife with unintended consequences. The study of IW takes as its point of departure an interest in work – the efforts of individuals and collective actors to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create a new the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relationships, resources, and routines.

(Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2011: 52–3)
Contemporary microhistorians and IW theorists are equally interested in the messy and incomplete comprehension of the social reality that actors face in their attempts to create their own lives within a world that both enables and constricts their freedom of action.

In the next sections I will first discuss the IW literature and its theoretical formalization of the role of actors and agency in creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions, followed by a brief introduction to microhistory, specifically the original Italian tradition, in its cultural as well as social history orientation, epitomized by Carlo Ginsburg and Giovanni Levi respectively. While Table 16.1 highlights some of the similarities in research objectives between the two research programmes, their research practices are frequently as different as their research settings. Modern microhistory is moreover split between those historians who still believe in answering ‘great historical questions’, i.e. address issues of conceptual and historiographical importance, and those who want to particularize microhistory in line with poststructural theories and negate the possibility of generalized theory altogether (Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013). It is more difficult to envisage how the latter group could conceivably contribute to the research agenda of IW, and vice versa, thus this introduction to microhistory largely focuses on the former.

**Neo-institutional theory in organization studies**

As one of the major theoretical approaches to the study of organizations, institutional theory has been described as a “dominant approach”, but one that is “creaking under the weight of its own theoretical apparatus” (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2011: 52). Its potential relevance to historical enquiry has been pointed out by Suddaby, Foster, and Mills (2014), who advocate a “historical institutionalism” that reflects the importance of historical processes in creating and maintaining enduring institutions, thus emphasizing the constitutive role of individuals and groups in shaping these institutions over time. There have been some examples of research that merges history and institutional theory, even though the way historians employ institutional theory is noticeably different from how institutional theory scholars use history (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2013). Yet none of these examples have addressed an area that Suddaby, Foster, and Mills highlight as potentially relevant for future research: the so-called paradox of embedded agency (Battilana and D’aunno, 2009; Seo and Creed, 2002). This paradox refers to the problem that if institutions are cognitively totalizing structures, how can individuals ever gain sufficient reflexivity to understand, and potentially change, their institutional environment? Suddaby, Foster, and Mills (2014: 117) have argued that historical techniques such as historical materialism or prosopography (the study of the biographical details of social groups) can help institutional theorists in overcoming the paradox in empirical research.

But historians would hardly be the first to tackle this issue, and there has been some substantial work on agency in the context of IW already. IW is a relatively new area of research that addresses theoretical concerns such as the role of actors and agency, which draws on Bourdieu and the wider literature on practice, as well as Giddens’ structuration theory and concepts such as organizational fields and boundary work. Most of these attempts to theorize agency would be unfamiliar to historians. There are several good introductions to the area of IW, and the closely related concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum, 2009; Battilana and D’aunno, 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2009, 2011; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and the following will just briefly sketch the main concepts and developments to clarify the main research agendas and the associated terminology.
Institutional entrepreneurship: agency returns to institutional theory

The core issues for the IW literature are based on neo-institutional theory, especially work by DiMaggio (1988) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). What is termed the 'old' institutional theory, epitomized for example by the work of Selznick (1949) on the Tennessee Valley Authority, was seen as perhaps closer to the humanities and historical research, as it focused more on individual agency and was less concerned with theorizing structural constraints and influences. In its restatements of older positions, neo-institutional theory was largely a reaction against extremely disembedded views of human agency, such as rational choice theory, that in its original format proposed the complete freedom of the individual to maximize in his or her best interest. Later this was mediated by bounded rationality and other ideas from neo-institutional economics, of which neo-institutional theory is the sociological counterpart. Important foundational concepts were Scott’s (2013) pillars of institutions, which categorized institutions beyond being formal or informal into regulatory (such as the law), normative (social conventions), and cognitive (largely informal and cultural, referring to proper and taken for granted ways of doing things). DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) work established the idea that within organizational fields (groups of organizations that are structurally equivalent, i.e. occupy comparable positions within a field) organizations will be subject to isomorphic change (small ongoing changes that make all organizations more similar) under certain conditions (technological uncertainty, resource dependence, and high levels of professionalization of organizational members).

While neo-institutional theory was largely a reaction against the disregard for the embeddedness of human agency (or what historians would refer to as context), research focused increasingly on structural embeddedness and cognitive schemas at a high level of abstraction at the expense of agency and interests, which were central to old institutionalism (Seo and Creed, 2002: 223). As a result institutional theory tended to explain stability better than change, and DiMaggio and Powell (1991) criticized these developments by suggesting that research ought to address the role of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’, by which they referred to individuals who used their agency to change existing institutions. But as Holm (1995), and Seo and Creed (2002) have highlighted, these attempts to reintroduce agency into neo-institutionalism gave rise to what is known as the paradox of embedded agency. It is in effect a restatement of one of the central problems in sociological theory: how to account for both structure and agency at the same time. Here neo-institutionalists draw on the work of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977), which has given rise to new conceptualizations of institutional change.

On the one hand, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship has been elaborated further. Institutional entrepreneurs are actors “who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence, 2004: 657). This has been, however, criticized as an overly muscular and heroic conception of agency (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2009), even though there have been attempts to link institutional entrepreneurship more closely to its alternative, the IW literature (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum, 2009). IW, on the other hand, draws more heavily on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Giddens’ structuration theory, focusing on practice as a micro-foundation for institutional research (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 15–29). This literature is of great interest to historians, as it reflects the main developments in the historical discipline of the 1980s and 1990s, when research returned to the experience of individuals without seeking to resuscitate the so-called ‘history of great men’ (the equivalent of the heroic institutional entrepreneur). It is here that the analogies between microhistory and IW become clearest, even though the way these problems are approached differs markedly.
Institutional work: an expanded concept of agency

The definition of IW is more comprehensive than for institutional entrepreneurship, especially in terms of the type of actors, and the type of agency, that are considered relevant, as it refers to “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215). This definition shifts the focus away from heroic individuals towards organizations and groups, and also considers any form of agency that engages with institutions as relevant, including the maintenance of institutions, which is usually not considered in agency terms because institutional theory assumes that institutions are self-replicating and require no agency to be maintained. Thus while IW focuses on how agency affects institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2009), it views agency as a multi-level phenomenon, in which the societal, organizational, and individual levels are nested within each other (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Again, this underscores the similarities to historical research, which emphasizes the (multiple) contexts and temporalities of the events or phenomena under consideration (Wadhwani and Bucheli, 2014: 10).

Of these three levels, IW is mostly concerned with the individual one, which has remained under-theorized. Battilana and D’aunno (2009) have combined Emirbayer and Miesche’s (1998) work on different types of agency (habitual, practical, projective) with the different types of institutional agency (creating, maintaining, disruptive). They particularly highlight the temporal features of different types of agency: habitual or iterative agency is oriented towards the past, practical-evaluative agency is based in the present, while projective agency is envisioning possible futures. Thus even though Battilana and D’aunno (2009: 57) show that all types of agency can be at play when it comes to creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions, they propose that iterative agency, due to its orientation towards the past, might be more likely to be relevant for the maintenance of institutions, and less likely to either create or disrupt institutions: “For example, it may be the case that iterative agency, because it is oriented to the past, is less likely than practical-evaluative or projective agency to promote action that creates or disrupts institutions” (Battilana and D’aunno, 2009: 50). This inertial view of the past is at odds with the more emancipatory conception of the past prevalent in history, and suggests that despite some common concerns, temporality is still conceptualized differently in institutional theory and historiography.

Similarly what historians would consider contextualization is subject to strict formalization in institutional theory: the organizational and societal levels of analysis are defined by field-level characteristics such as the degree of heterogeneity, or the degree of institutionalization. This theorizes how ‘context’ influences agency, either as an enabling or a constraining factor on specific types of agency (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum, 2009). Heterogeneity refers to multiple, alternative, and conflicting institutional orders that are more likely to give rise to institutional entrepreneurship (the changing of institutions). The effects attributed to institutionalization are less clear, as low levels of institutionalization are linked to higher levels of uncertainty, and thus might both enable or constrain individual agency.

Moreover, the individual’s social position within these fields is significant in enabling them to mobilize allies and resources, as well as allowing them to articulate a vision for change as their status grants them legitimacy to promote new ideas. Whether these are central or marginal figures within their respective fields may depend on the field characteristics, as empirical work has come to contradictory conclusions in this regard (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006: Leblebici et al., 1991). Research on institutional change has also highlighted that both at the organizational and individual level, agency might be distributed, suggesting that change might be “a collective phenomenon that involves actors with access to varying kinds and levels of resources who act in either a coordinated or uncoordinated way” (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum, 2009: 89).
Distributed agency has been the subject of several studies (Ross, 2007; Quack, 2007) and might be of greater interest to historians because multi-level research on distributed agency is likely to encounter what historians have traditionally referred to as contingency (O’Sullivan and Graham, 2010).

Of even greater relevance to historians is research on the temporal or evolutionary aspects of IW, such as Zietsma and Lawrence’s (2010) study of the interplay of boundary work and practice work. Boundaries refer to the limits of organizational fields, the demarcation lines between people and groups, whereas practices are defined as activities that are typical for and acceptable within social groups. In their study they highlight that agency of different varieties is always evident, but changes depending on the state of the organizational field. When boundaries were intact, agency was habitual; when they were challenged, actors reacted in a practical manner to ongoing issues, whereas projective agency dominated when new, temporary boundaries shielded their activities until they could become established or were again successfully challenged. Hence Zietsma and Lawrence (2010: 213) conclude that “embedded agency may only be paradoxical if viewed at a distance” and is resolved by closer attention to actors’ boundary and practice work. Somewhat under-theorized is the role of time and sequence, as they describe the transformation of the organizational field as a cyclical phenomenon.

While hardly an exhaustive review, this suggests some limitations in the current literature on IW: with few exceptions, practice-focused studies are limited to investigating short timespans due to their intense research methods that are based on participant observation, interviewing, or (video) ethnography. Yet most significant transformations of institutional frameworks are likely to occur in the medium term, which raises the question whether a practice-oriented approach can adequately connect individual agency with institutional structures (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2009: 6). Historical research, for example, largely ascribes a far greater degree of agency to individuals than most IW scholars would, which raises the question of whether a theory of individual agency can be embedded within the organizational and societal level at all, a point of some debate for microhistorians (Ginzburg, 1989).

**Microhistory as a distinctive historiographical tradition**

Research in microhistory has been far less coherent than the converging research agendas of IW and institutional entrepreneurship, which can be attributed in part to the more individualized nature of research in history and other humanities. Here, research agendas frequently lack the social movement-style dynamics of the social sciences. Over the years microhistory came to refer to a variety of research designs and methodologies, largely united by their focus on the smaller scale, even though the conceptualization of scale and its function within the methodological innovations of microhistory were frequently misunderstood (Levi, 1991). Magnússon and Szijártó (2013) have defined microhistory by three elements: firstly, the reduction of scale and the use of a focal point for the investigation; secondly, the attempt to answer ‘great historical questions’; thirdly, the emphasis on human agency in the analysis.

In terms of content, microhistory has become largely associated with medieval or early modern studies of belief systems in rural, or at least marginalized, communities, and as such has not had any great impact on BH. There have been some attempts, however, to highlight the historiographical opportunities of engaging with microhistory for economic, business and social historians, such as in the edited volume by Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (2012) or Anna Linda Musacchio Adorisio’s (2014) recent exploration of using microhistory for narrative analysis. Magnússon and Szijártó (2013: 7) similarly argue that microhistory’s particular blend of focusing on ‘great historical questions’, i.e. theoretical concepts, while also being concerned
with the discovery of the ‘meaning’ of the lived experience of historical actors “makes possible a harmonious blend of social historical and cultural historical approaches”. Yet even on this point, the two authors disagree, and the above reflects the position of István Szijártó, while his coauthor, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, is more influenced by cultural history and thus does not espouse microanalysis to elucidate more general issues, but rather values the approach for its potential to break with metanarratives.

This, however, is at odds with Italian microhistory, which has, despite some internal diversity between social and cultural history approaches, consistently disputed postmodernist claims (Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013: 19). Instead, leading Italian microhistorians have emphasized their claim to augment social science history through their own, more particularizing, methodologies, and thus explicitly accepted that this would not please either the supporters or detractors of the “integration of history in the social sciences” (Ginzburg and Poni, 1991: 8–9). Thus while this partial commitment to the concerns of traditional social science history, especially its focus on generalization and making contributions to theory, may appear backward to modern cultural history, Szijártó argues that this is precisely its potential advantage as it allows a merging of cultural and social history approaches, which is currently at the forefront of historical practice (Cook, 2012; Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013: 6). That this makes it even more significant as a theoretical approach and methodological practice that would offer great insights to contemporary MOH, as it has the potential to substantially augment its programme of inserting historical approaches into organization studies. This chapter can only serve as a preliminary exploration of these issues, and seeks to sketch some of the insights from microhistory that have potential relevance or bear resemblance to the research agenda of IW.

**The issue of scale: history under the microscope**

Microhistorians have disagreed with definitions that reduce microhistory either to the small scale, or to specific subject matter. Giovanni Levi described the latter as belonging to a “rather traditional theory of history” (Levi, 2012: 122) in opposition to which microhistory stresses methodology and the cognitive dimension of historical research. Ginzburg has similarly argued against postmodern relativism as depriving history precisely of its cognitive value, even though this also necessitates opposition to the empiricist approach. He espouses an epistemological constructivism, defined as “the definite awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are constructed and not given: the identificaton of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analyzed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader” (Ginzburg, 1993: 32).

The primary construct through which microhistorians define their research site is scale. Levi, however, argues that scale as an inherent characteristic of reality is largely tangential, emphasizing instead the importance of the reduction of scale as an analytical procedure, a form of experimentation that assumes that “microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved” (Levi, 1991: 95, 97). Thus scale, in combination with a focal point, permits microhistorians to ask different questions, to follow individuals by virtue of their names through the sources (Ginzburg and Poni, 1991), with an ambition amounting to writing ‘total histories’ of individuals. This can lead to unpacking, indeed deconstructing, researchers’ assumptions about how to interpret the sources. A good example are claims about the functioning of early modern markets, which looked liked they were already exhibiting forms of impersonal exchange due to the large number of monetized exchanges of land titles. However, a reduction of scale allowed researchers to appreciate that the price of land varied according to the kinship relations between
the contractual parties, undermining claims about precocious capitalism (Levi, 1991: 97; for a
similar point see Martí and Mair, 2009). Thus the analytic approach to scale is constitutive of
microhistory, but the ‘micro’ here refers not to size per se but to the metaphor of the micro-

The paradox of microhistory: balancing the particular with the general

Hand-in-hand with the focused reduction of scale goes the issue of generalization and the
status of the particular and the non-reducible. Microhistory adopted a very particular, and on
the face of it paradoxical, attitude towards researching the particular, in its rich context. This
implied to not reduce individuals and their relationships to abstract constructs, without aban-
donning the attempt to generalize from unique and by definition non-repeatable events. This is
most clearly epitomized in Edoardo Grendi’s (1977: 512) notion of the “exceptional normal”.
Microhistorians self-consciously refused the selection criteria of the Annales school, which con-
sidered cases relevant only if they were typical and suitable for serialization, in favour of the
anomalous, described within its multiple contexts (Ginzburg, 1993: 33). Changing scales towards
a micro-social approach is thus not a simple adjustment, which would be based on the assump-
tion that different levels are nested within each other and thus exist objectively in an outside
reality, as argued by Battilana and D’aunno (2009). Indeed, Ginzburg (1993: 27) emphasizes that
certain phenomena can only be grasped by means of a macroscopic perspective. This sug-
gests that the reconciliation between macro- and microhistory is not at all taken for granted
… This methodological prescription led to an affirmation of a decisively ontological
nature: reality is fundamentally discontinuous and heterogeneous. Consequently, no con-
clusion attained apropos a determinate sphere can be transferred automatically to a more
general sphere.

Within a microhistorical ontology, the small-scale is not embedded within its larger contexts,
or in terms of institutional theory, institutions are not considered cognitively totalizing and
socially all-encompassing structures that affect multiple levels of analysis. Instead, microhistorians
seek to demonstrate that the social norms that rule human behaviour are always multiple, incon-
sistent, conflicting; not homogeneous and easy to navigate (Levi, 1991, 2012; Revel 1995). In
IW terms, all organizational fields thus feature a higher than expected degree of heterogeneity at
close range (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum, 2009); a point also made by Zietsma and Lawrence
(2010). Nevertheless, the original Italian proponents of microhistory, especially Ginzburg and
Levi, have always maintained the need for generalization, in order to answer ‘great historical
questions’, and emphatically rejected a postmodern relativist position. But any analogy of
cases on which generalization can be constructed must either be based on a reductionist rendi-
tion of the particular case, which, by stripping it of its uniqueness, might render it less valuable, or
on generalization at a theoretical level. This distinction between the particular as the empirical,
and the general as theoretical, is perhaps one of the most important insights that MOH scholars
can derive from microhistory, as it illustrates how concepts and theories can be developed while
retaining their historical cognisance (Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014).

How exactly this tension between the particular and the general is resolved in microhistory is
perhaps most clearly explained by Ginzburg (2012) with reference to the emic–etic distinction
from ethnography, which broadly maps onto historical debates about the role of the present in
the past (Lorenz, 2011). While emic refers to an insider’s perspective, etc is a more compara-
tive perspective, that of a more distant observer (the terminology is borrowed from the work of

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Kenneth L. Pike, an American linguist). Ginzburg equates any attempts to write history from a purely emic perspective with antiquarianism, while an overemphasis on an etic angle will lead to anachronism. Thus it is the dynamic tension between the etic, present-focused questions, and the emic evidence from the past that exemplifies good historical research: we invariably start from etic questions, to be confronted with emic answers, that in turn modify our questions towards becoming more closely aligned to the concerns of the past that is being studied, without ever entirely abandoning the etic dimension, because the historian, by definition, lives and writes in the present (Ginzburg, 2012: 107–11). Different historical traditions shift the emphasis towards one or the other extreme: understanding of the past on its own terms, in contrast to ‘presentist’ history in the service of a political agenda or theory. At its extremes, both positions are unacceptable to the historical profession today, and can be equated with determinism, relativism, or antiquarianism.

What this discussion of the emic–etic divide thus clarifies is how microhistorians can simultaneously embrace the unique and unrepeatable character of the past, without abandoning the pursuit of ‘great historical questions’ (which are, ultimately, theoretical). Thus simple juxtapositions that follow Windelband’s (Windelband and Oakes, 1980; Lamiell, 1998) dichotomy between idiographic and nomothetic approaches, such as Lippmann and Aldrich’s (2014) distinction between sociological approaches as ‘all alike’ and historical research as ‘all unique’ do not do justice to specific research agendas in both organization studies and history, which are in fact mutually commensurable. On the one hand, the IW literature seeks to rediscover agency without abandoning the core ideas of institutional theory, while on the other hand microhistory’s conception of the ‘exceptional normal’ highlights that some branches of historiography offer the opportunity for what I would call ‘generalizing from the unique’. Levi (2012: 128) summarized this attitude by emphasizing the “absolutely unrepeatable nature of an event while at the same time retaining the possibility of generalizing from particular cases”. Thus microhistory does not recognize the paradox of embedded agency, but instead replaces it with a methodology that has paradoxical aims (elucidating the particular and the general concurrently) and a paradigmatic approach that has human agency at its core.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Even though IW and microhistory share some of the core concerns about the constitutive role of individual agency within organizations and society, there are some disciplinary differences in their respective approaches. Thus while IW seeks to bring agency back into institutional theory, this is fundamentally an attempt to add agency at the micro level to the structural conceptions of the organizational and societal level. Here IW sees different levels as nested, an idea that microhistory has refuted as too objectivist. The microhistorical challenge to the older *Annales* school was more radical in that it rejected structuralist ontologies in favour of a complex and contingent view of agency that is at the core of both individual experience and social interactions. As already indicated above, microhistory does not recognize any paradox of embedded agency, and instead reframes it as the inherent tension within a research methodology focused on analyzing evidence as a form of ‘clues’. Indeed such a paradox only makes sense considering the basic premise of institutional theory, that of cognitively totalizing institutions. Microhistory, however, emphasizes the overlapping and conflicting nature of social structures, which permit individuals to maximize their freedom to act independently. In fact, Ginzburg viewed culture (the microhistorical equivalent of institutions) as more enabling than constraining, “a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditional liberty” (Ginzburg, 1992: xxi), thus echoing the image of the ‘iron cage’ that has been so influential in institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).
IW continues to conceive of institutions as self-replicating structures that require only minimal maintenance work, and thus naturalizes their existence. Thus the role of the individual cannot be central to theorizing, because it is incidental to the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions. Microhistory on the other hand is more interpretative and constructivist in origin, and argues, in line with Tsoukas and Chia (2002) that change is not exceptional, but normal. The implications for research in IW is to focus on the practice of maintenance over long periods of time as truly remarkable. This would permit a reconnection with the original drive behind institutionalism, which was the investigation of the (surprising) continuity of certain structures (North, 1990).

As a result of this structuralist focus, not only is the individual level of action undertheorized in institutional theory, the same holds true for time. Any past-oriented activities are classed as iterative, which promotes an inertial view of the past. Yet not only is maintenance work more complex, the same is true for past-oriented action which might well create new institutions, as argued by influential historians such as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) or Anderson (1991). Microhistorians, for example, have demonstrated how challenges to the status quo emerged from alternative readings of tradition and entitlements (Ginzburg, 1992; Levi, 1988) and thus focus on the emancipatory potential of action informed by the reinterpretation of history.

Finally, the engagement with temporally embedded action has been limited in IW because of the intense research methods that focus on short timespans (Suddaby, Foster, and Mills, 2014). Thus while microhistory has also used focal events in their research, their methods were based on historical methodology which is retrospective and largely indirect and documentary. Making these as yet underspecified methods such as archival research (Decker, 2013, 2014; Mills and Helms Mills, 2011), oral history (Haynes, 2010; Vansina, 1985), visual history, or critical source analysis (Kipping, Wadhwani, and Bucheli, 2014; Rowlinson, 2004) more available to organizational researchers would permit a more grounded approach to IW from the perspective of actors both contemporary and historically. By drawing on microhistory, the research agenda of IW could develop alternative ways to resolve the paradox of embedded agency. While at an aggregate scale institutions may appear cognitively totalizing structures, at the level of the individual this invisible cage can be surprisingly flexible – a point made by Ginzburg in 1976, and echoed in Zietsma and Lawrence’s work in 2010.

When comparing the historiographic tradition of microhistory with the insights from institutional theory, it should become clear that MOH can draw on much more than just management theories or the philosophy of history, without taking an empiricist stance. A ‘historiographic turn’ would mean to reconnect with the ‘mothership’ of history as a disciplinary body of knowledge. This is rarely done because theoretical debates in history are usually embedded in empirical issues, unlike the social science practice that keeps both separate. That does not, however, mean that no theoretical insights are available; just that they require a different, a historiographic, sensibility that focuses on the concepts employed and transfers them into an appropriately social scientific language. This may entail engaging with topics that appear far removed from organizational concerns such as the Inquisition in early modern Italy, as the relevance may not lie in the subject per se, but in its conceptualization as a precursor to relevant theory.

As someone who was trained in the more implicit, at times craft-oriented, environment of history departments in both Germany and the UK, I was not equipped on joining the field of management studies to articulate my epistemological, theoretical, or methodological position, which in history are merged at a conceptual level. Yet even though historiography (in the sense of historical theory) did not feature very strongly in my training, my readings were broadly influenced by what might be considered the second generation of cultural historians (Cook, 2012). Microhistory, or philosophers of history like R. G. Collingwood or David Carr, were not familiar to me before I started reading their work in 2013, only to find that here were other historians.
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who put into words what I was struggling to make explicit. Thus I had an experience similar
to Ginzburg (1993: 34), who, reflecting on Levi’s (1991) description of microhistory, concluded
that “[t]o my surprise I discovered how important to me were, unknowingly, books I had never
read, events and persons I did not know had existed … the ‘I’ is porous”.

Notes

1 At the Association of Business Historians’ conference in Newcastle, UK, in 2014.
2 Microhistory has come to mean different things in different national historiographies, and its relationship
with historical anthropology also differs. For a brief introduction see Iggers, Historiography in the
Twentieth Century and Magnússon and Szijártó, What is Microhistory?

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Mothership reconnection


