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Actors, networks, theory, and history – what are we producing?

Albert J. Mills, Terrance G. Weatherbee, and Patricia Genoe McLaren

Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.  
*(Winston Churchill, 1935)*

Those who fail to learn from the ontological status of history are doomed to reproduce it.  
*(Weatherbee et al., 2012)*

In this commentary we reflect on history as an actor-network effect. In particular we explore how our (shift in) thinking on history positions us in a supposed actor-network.

A good place to start is at the beginning, that is, a place that we designate as the starting point – a socially constructed point which allows us to ‘follow the actors’ (Latour, 2005). To that end, we pose a question about what we think we have produced. This will allow us to ‘reassemble’ (Latour, 2005) the various interactions – enrollment, translation, punctuation, etc. – that have played a part in the construction of our actor-network connectedness. When we say “think we have produced” that is not to say that we are confused or uncertain about what we are doing but, rather, we are acknowledging that actor-network effects are always ongoing and often depend on the various interactions involved as to what the perceived outcome (namely ‘knowledge’) is. Karl Weick (1995) captures this process well when he says that “we don’t know what we think until we have said it.” By the end of this chapter we may know more.

At the time of this writing, what we set out to produce is a different approach to the study and understanding of history. The ingredients of that approach – which we call ANTi-History (Durepos & Mills, 2012; Durepos, Chapter 12, this volume; Mills & Durepos, 2010) – center on a fusion of the sociology of knowledge literature (Mannheim, 1968; Marx & Engels, 1996), post-structuralist historiography (Jenkins, 1994; Munslow, 2012a), and actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1988; Law, 1994) – especially the ‘ANT and After’ (Law & Hassard, 1999) literature. Not surprisingly, many of these elements are dotted throughout various chapters in this edited collection and so we will only provide a brief overview here.

Essentially, we view history as an effect of actor-networks. As such history is not to be viewed as real or verifiable – it is, as Alun Munslow would say, ontologically unobtainable (see Chapter 10). This, and a multitude of other reasons, has driven historian Keith Jenkins (2009) to reject history as a useful pursuit. Nonetheless, for the very reasons that Jenkins rejects history we see it as
a vitally important aspect of socio-political life that needs to be explored, especially if we are to mitigate its powerful effects. We argue that history, what people come to accept as knowledge of the past (or, what Munslow, Chapter 10, succinctly calls “the-past-as-history”), is both powerful and meaningful. Its very meaningfulness is what makes it powerful, in a Foucauldian (1980) sense of dispersed positive and negative effects. As such, history is arguably a meta-discourse (Jenkins, 1995) or meta-narrative (Munslow, 2012b) that serves to provide meaning to people’s lives.

Given this, we contend that it is worth preserving ‘history’ as a way of making sense of and valuing social life: it is for us a useful fiction (White, 1985). However, the very properties of history (the story) are subject to socio-political pressures, not the least of which includes the inherent power of History (the discipline) and those who influence the construction and dissemination of its historical accounts (Kalela, 2012; Lemisch, 1975; Zinn, 1990). Thus, if we can shed light on the processes of history production, what becomes viewed as received knowledge of the past, we can help to liberate people from the dead hand of history. That, at least, is the aim of ANTi-History, which we view as critical organizational historiography. Therefore ANTi-History is, as we presently understand it, part critique (of the problematic nature of history); part methodology (in encouraging and producing multiple histories); part ontological (in revealing the ontological oscillation between the material effects of actor-networks and the fictive outcome(s) of history production); and part socio-political (as we attempt to enroll others to this or that way of viewing history).

In the process of laying out our notion(s) of how history comes to be produced we are learning our craft and doing so within the context of actor-network effects (at least that is our supposition). This means that we have, as yet, only partly practiced aspects of our declared approach. Some of our earlier attempts preceded a more fully developed theory of history, let alone ANTi-History, and focused on the importance of history for understanding management and organizational phenomena – very much in the vein of Alfred Kieser’s (1994; see Chapter 3, this volume) call for a greater understanding of history (see, for example, Genoe McLaren, 2011; Mills, 1996). Other attempts have involved the production of alternative accounts of the past in an attempt to produce multiple histories of management and organizational studies (MOS) – see Chapters 22 (McLaren and Mills) and 25 (Coller, McNally, and Mills) of this book. Other work has focused on critique of the field – to open up space for more diversity of accounts and ways of understanding history (Mills, Weatherbee, & Durepos, 2014; Weatherbee, 2012). There have also been some preliminary attempts to apply ANTi-History to the understanding of how histories themselves are produced. An early version involved a following of the actors involved in the development and publication of a history of Pan American Airways (Durepos, Helms Mills & Mills, 2008) and a more recent version focused on the construction of a history of the Academy of Management (Myrick, Helms Mills & Mills, 2013). In this last regard further research is underway on a wide range of projects.

All this is by way of suggesting that what we think we are producing is defined by the publications we have produced to date and how these non-human actants (namely publications) tend to take on a life of their own (become actors) and influence what we are attempting to produce (ANTI-History and ANTi-histories). For example, recently two colleagues were advised to revise their article on management and history through greater theorization. They were seemingly advised to seek out our ANTi-History work. They did so and the article was eventually published, with some credit to our work. However, the article, although highly interesting and well written, bore little relationship to what we think is our suggested approach. It is as if ANTi-History serves as what Hartt (2013) terms a “non-corporeal actant,” namely, a set of disparate ideas whose influence owes more to the parts that are cobbled together through various publications than the overall intent of the authors themselves. But then who are the authors?
This question takes us to another actor-network effect – the production of an actor-network itself.

ANTi-History, we argue, is an effect of a network of actors that has steadily formed over the years through its various relationships with the Sobey School of Business’ PhD in Management and the work on Anti-History arising from it. All the actors are linked through association with the PhD program as either students/graduates/faculty and non-human actors (Latour, 2005), such as program elements (courses, stories, myths, etc.). In the latter case it can be argued that elements of the PhD program helped to shape the idea of ANTi-History. These elements include a strong emphasis on postpositivist thinking (Prasad, 2005) with its focus on social constructivism, critical management philosophies (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and the role of history in MOS. Nor can we ignore the strong elements of positivism in the program, which serve as a contrasting mode or modes of thinking, serving to provide a context of multi-paradigmatic choice, which may be linked to enrollment and translation processes and the inhibition of early black-boxed thinking.

Some sense of an actor-network at play was captured quite early on by two or three Sobey PhD students, at different points when they spoke about what came to be called ‘the Halifax School.’ What would constitute such a school was never really specified. For some it was a generalized sense that the program combined some unique features; for others it was more narrowly focused on management and organizational history (see Corrigan, 2015). The point here is not to argue any claim for the existence of a ‘Halifax School’ so much as to identify a feeling among some of the actors involved that there is a specific effect of combinations of exposure to the Sobey PhD. At the very least it may serve as an enrollment and translation element as actors are drawn to self-identify with something.

Outside of the Sobey PhD program itself there has been some identification of the “Sobey School of Business at [Saint] Mary’s University in Canada” as an “important research cluster for MOH” (management and organizational history) (Decker, Rowlinson & Hassard, 2014). The description is part of a successful grant proposal to the Economic and Social Research Council (of the United Kingdom) for the development of a seminar series on MOH that includes ‘Actor-Network Theory and ANTi-History’ as one of its six proposed seminars. In describing the purpose of the seminar, the authors go on to attribute the Sobey research cluster as having developed “a new critical approach to history based on Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT),” citing “Gabrielle [Durepos] … a graduate of Sobey … [as] instrumental in developing the ANTi-History concept together with [Albert] Mills. Their contribution will be discussed by leading UK and US scholars such as John Hassard, Bill Cooke and R. Daniel Wadwhani" (Decker, Rowlinson & Hassard, 2014).

Here we catch a glimpse of another, larger and linked actor-network – those scholars interested in encouraging a greater interest in, and emphasizing the importance of, the role of history in MOH (see for example Booth and Rowlinson, Chapter 5, this volume). To that end, the Sobey actor-network may be described as a node of this broader network, namely an “important research cluster for MOH” (Decker, Rowlinson & Hassard, 2014, our emphasis).

**Summary and conclusion**

It is to this last point that we want to return. It strikes us as a very fair and welcoming comment to cast ‘us’ as part of a wider actor-network. We can be considered enrolled. Any sense of a ‘Halifax School’ has tended, at the very least, to include reference to MOH. So, we have no concerns about being included in a fairly broad actor-network that embraces a number of actors (human and non-human) who are interested in (re)developing an interest in history in
management and organizational theory. Like other actor-networks this broad network contains a series of smaller nodes that have the potential to engender tensions – tensions that may lead to de-enrollments. One of those nodes is likely a fairly sizeable group of actors who view the process of history as the discovery or uncovering of factual truths about the past, who view the past-as-history (Munslow, Chapter 10, this volume). Another node likely consists of those actors involved in the development of critical approaches to organizational history – we see ourselves within this node.

Despite the potential for tension and conflict amongst actors and actor-networks, the field appears to be going through a period of growth and discussion as scholars from different nodes meet and discuss various issues. Perhaps a good example of this is the joint Critical Management Studies (CMS) and Management History (MH) divisions’ joint seminars and sessions at the 2014 Academy of Management annual conference. The situation may be helped by perceived frustrations with management and organization theory and continued evidence of ahistorical work, which creates a common goal in uniting the efforts of all management and organizational history scholars. See Kipping and Üsden, Chapter 27, this volume, for their take on the common goals of, and increasing tensions between, various proponents of the importance of history to management and organizational studies.

Enrollment triumphs over translation. But there are cracks as evidenced by scholars “from the South” who view the current debate as an argument about the production of newer or different Western histories of MOH (see Ibarra-Colado, Chapter 23, this volume). We see our own position as, if not in the cracks, standing on a precipice of them. While the broader networks of which we are a part focus on history (e.g. Wren & Bedeian, 2009), historical context (Kieser, Chapter 3, this volume), or the writing of history (Booth and Rowlinson, Chapter 5, this volume), ANTi-History focuses on how the past is (re)produced as history. In other words, there is an inherent tension in our work that helps to place us within the realm of those interested in history while simultaneously having the potential to pit us against those who see history as more than just an effect. In the former pursuit we seem to fit squarely in MOH, while in the latter we may be more akin to Cultural Theory. It is arguably the oscillation between contributing to multiple histories while focusing on the production of something called a ‘history’ that allows us to be simultaneously enrolled yet apart from MOH. It’s all in the translation.

References


Albert J. Mills et al.