6

Revisiting the historic turn: a personal reflection

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Having contributed to the historic turn in organization studies in various ways, not least by naming it as such so that it can be dated and commemorated, and helping to launch the journal Management & Organizational History, I would like to reflect on what the historic turn means to me. First of all I will set out a celebratory story of the historic turn and my part in it. Then I will offer a more personal contingent counter narrative of how the historic turn nearly didn’t happen, or at least how my part in it was more tenuous than might appear because of the difficulties I had in getting historical papers accepted at conferences and in journals. Finally I will describe the context in which my own personal turn to history came about.

The success of the historic turn

The article on “The Treatment of History in Organisation Studies: Towards an ‘Historic Turn?’” that I co-authored with Peter Clark (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004), was published in a special issue of Business History on “History in Organization Studies,” edited by Behlül Üsdiyen and Alfred Kieser (Üsdiyen & Kieser, 2004). It was one of the five papers that Üsdiyen and Kieser selected for the special issue from the European Group for Organization Studies subtheme, “Rediscovering History in Organizations,” which they had organized for the 2001 colloquium in Lyon. According to the Taylor & Francis website for Business History the article was the second most highly cited output from the journal up to the end of August 2014 (with 35 citations in CrossRef after 39 citations for the most highly cited output; 124 citations in Google Scholar, Sept. 8, 2014). The Introduction to the Special Issue was the sixth most highly cited output from the journal (with 26 citations in CrossRef; 80 citations in Google Scholar, Sept. 8, 2014); although it must be conceded that by the standards of business and management journals in general, and organization studies in particular, Business History does not have a high impact factor. So the most highly cited articles in Business History hardly count as highly cited articles in organization studies or business and management more generally.

Apart from Üsdiyen and Kieser’s introduction to the special issue of Business History there are several other articles that we cited in our own article which could be seen as initiating an historic turn before us, such as: Mayer Zald’s (1993) reconceptualization of organization...
Revisiting the historic turn

studies as humanistic as well as a scientific enterprise (109 citations in Google Scholar); Alfred Kieser’s (1994) manifesto for history in organization studies set out in the Crossroads section of *Organization Science* (271 citations in Google Scholar); as well as Roy Jacques’ (1996) book *Manufacturing the Employee* (359 citations in Google Scholar). I fully acknowledge the importance of each of these in relation to our own thinking. In fact I wrote a methodological chapter on historical perspectives in organization studies for a book devoted to discussing the significance of *Manufacturing the Employee* (Rowlinson, 2004), as well as a critique of Foucauldian history in organization studies (Rowlinson & Carter, 2002) that focuses on Jacques’ book, along with Gibson Burrell’s *Pandemonium* (Burrell, 1997) and Stewart Clegg’s (1989) *Frameworks of Power*. In general terms my critique of Jacques, Burrell, and Clegg was that they tended to overlook relevant historiographical debates, and even if they didn’t treat history as a repository of facts they did tend to rely on particular historiographical interpretations that appealed to their own historical sensibilities.

By referring to a ‘historic turn’ we were trying to overcome what we saw, and to some extent still see, as the insularity of organization studies, by using a term that seemed to have growing acceptance in the wider social sciences. The historic or ‘historical turn’ has also been picked up approvingly in influential books such as Sewell’s (2005: 358) *Logics of History*, where it is linked to Giddens’ (1984) recognition of the need for a diachronic notion of ‘structuration’ as a process rather than a synchronic static concept of structure. As far as I can make out we were the first to pick up on the terminology of the historic turn in organization studies, and I still feel that it provides a yardstick for assessing just how historical the various research programs in organization studies have become. It also has the advantage that it refers to history and the historic turn in social science more generally, rather than suggesting that organization studies should engage in dialogue with the specific field of business history.

I should note that I had already addressed the question of whether business historians should engage with organization studies, and if so which theoretical approach might be most conducive to theoretically informed research in business history. This was in an article for the *Journal of Industrial History* (Rowlinson, 2001), a journal that has since closed but which had recently been set up with John Wilson as editor. Wilson encouraged me to submit the article to his journal after hearing a presentation I gave at the Management History Research Group. For me there is a parallel between advocating an historic turn in organization studies and an organizational turn in business history, which means encouraging business historians to turn away from the deference towards economics that they have retained, especially in the UK, from when they shared economic history departments.

In the same year, 2004, that our article was published in *Business History* I also coordinated a showcase symposium on “Management and Organizational History: The Future of the Past” at the Academy of Management Meeting in New Orleans, sponsored by the Management History Division, Organization and Management Theory Division, and the Critical Management Studies Interest Group. Although it was scheduled for the last session in the Academy’s program the room was packed and there was a lively discussion of how to advance history within the Academy of Management. The symposium encouraged Charles Booth and I to press on with our conversation with Sage about the possibility of launching a new historical journal. The journal *Management & Organizational History* was launched in 2006 with Charles Booth as editor and myself, Roy Jacques, Lois Kurowski, and Richard Marens as co-editors. I took over as editor in 2009 and continued in that role until 2013, managing the move to Scholar One and the remarkably smooth transfer from Sage to Taylor & Francis under the Routledge imprint for 2013, alongside *Business History*. 

71
All of this might sound rather like the kind of celebratory self-congratulatory narrative that you might expect from a rhetorical (Suddaby, Foster & Trank, 2010) corporate history (Delahaye et al., 2009). It would be all too easy to carry on in this vein by highlighting the various historical special issues of leading journals such as the Journal of Organizational Change Management (van Baalen & Bogenrieder, 2009), Journal of Management Studies (O’Sullivan & Graham, 2010), and the Special Topic Forum for the Academy of Management Review (Godfrey et al., forthcoming), and the increasing readiness of leading journals to accept historical articles, with John Hassard’s (2012) article on the Hawthorne Studies winning the prize for the best article in the year from Human Relations. However, as with any such narrative it is possible to construct an alternative that emphasizes the contingency of events.

The accidental historic turn

I was clearing out my office recently and as I was looking through a filing cabinet deciding what to throw away I came across some old files that reminded me of how coincidental it was that we named the historic turn when we did. I found an earlier version of our paper, “Towards a Historical Critique of Organization Studies,” that we’d submitted to the Management History Division for the 2000 Academy of Meeting in Toronto, which I believe was the first submission I ever made to the Academy of Management. But unfortunately with two reviewers ticking “Definitely reject” and a third “Weak but accept” there was no way I was going to Toronto. The reviewers’ comments did not encourage me to think that my work would ever be well received by the Management History division:

A very thorough critique of approaches/theories in organization studies and certainly a sound argument for the position that they are ahistorical. While the author(s) makes this point well, I have a concern that this will not be of widespread interest to Management History division listeners.

Why do I have the feeling that all of these approaches are full of scholarly debate and short on evidence? This appears to be a battlefield of theorists that practitioners would find incomprehensible.

Another reviewer’s only handwritten comment was:

THIS IS WAY OUTSIDE MY AREA OF EXPERTISE, BUT MY SEMI-EDUCATED GUESS IS THAT IT’S NOT A VERY GOOD PAPER & SHOULD PROBABLY BE REJECTED.

Apart from the generic comment that, “The writing style could be simplified and the paragraphs shortened for ease of reading,” there was little or nothing in the reviews that suggested how we could improve our paper.

I cannot say we were undeterred but nevertheless we decided that the EGOS 2001 stream might be more receptive to our ideas than the Management History division the year before. So we submitted a slightly modified version of the paper titled “The Treatment of History in Organization Studies.” There was no subtitle and no mention at all of ‘the historic turn,’ not even a citation for McDonald’s (1996) book The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences. I can remember a lot about EGOS in Lyon. Many of the main characters that I associate with the historic turn attended the stream, which was held in a sweltering room with
no air conditioning. I visited Lyon again this year for a workshop on “Business History in Mutation: Methodological and Interpretative Issues.” I was reminded of how nice it is to walk around Lyon at night and how many restaurants there are serving regional French food, which makes it difficult for vegetarians like me. I can’t remember if it was Lyon or Montreal around 1990 and my girlfriend at the time rang a restaurant and asked, in very good French, if they had any vegetarian options, only to be told, “It’s a French restaurant.” What I don’t remember is how our paper was received, but it must have gone reasonably well to be selected for the special issue of *Business History*.

On Wednesday, September 26, 2001 Behlül and Alfred emailed me and Peter to inform us that they had selected our paper for inclusion in their proposal for a special issue and asked us to send them an abstract for a revised version of the paper we’d presented in Lyon. It was in the abstract that we sent to Behlül in return on September 27, 2001 that we mentioned the historic turn for the first time, and although it still wasn’t in the title, we did so in much bolder terms than in the final published version. The abstract began:

“...In this paper we call for a ‘historic turn’ in organization studies along the lines of the turn towards history that has transformed other fields in the social sciences and humanities."

You might think that once our paper had acquired an explicit call for a historic turn its significance was immediately recognized, but the review process for *Business History* belies any such notion. Emails from 13 years ago are hard to find, but hard paper copies in the filing cabinet do not disappear so easily, and fortunately for some reason I printed out some of the email correspondence between Peter Clark and Alfred Kieser concerning the progress of our paper, which Peter Clark must have forwarded to me. I would like to reproduce some extracts from the emails (with permission from Peter Clark and Alfred Kieser). The first one was sent from Alfred Kieser to Peter Clark at 5 p.m. on Christmas Day 2001, which gives us an indication of Alfred’s work ethic:

Subject Special Issue

Dear Peter, dear Mick

I’ve got a very bad conscience. However, isn’t Xmas a time for achieving forgiveness?

About three months ago you sent Behlül and me an email in which you asked for advice concerning your contribution to the Special Issue. As I said, I feel very bad, but these last three months were just crazy. I hope my advice is not arriving too late!

These are the three options that you saw for a revision of your paper:

“1. Remove the Burrell, Bauman, the Holocaust and bureaucracy section …”

... I’m clearly in favour of option 1. In the present version of the paper, I find the section on ‘Analytically Structured Narrative’ difficult to understand...

From Alfred Kieser

Peter Clark, no slouch himself, responded to Alfred the next morning:

Subject RE: Special Issue

Alfred, Boxing Day

We will probably take option 1 as you suggest...
Later the same day Alfred emailed Peter:

Dear Peter,
Thanks for the reward. Four grand-children were fighting each other with terrible bawling. I enjoyed it for a while then I fled from them to my desk. Reading your paper and commenting on it was like finding a shelter from the storm.

The problem with population ecology with regard to history is that this approach does not take evolution in the evolutionary mechanisms into consideration. A medieval craft shop was not allowed to innovate. Nowadays, innovations (variations) are systematically produced and preselected by market tests before they are launched.

The problem with neo-institutionalism is that it does not explain how rationality myths come about and, eventually, disappear.

Have a nice stay in cold Berlin!

Best wishes,
Alfred

Then the papers were sent out for review and we heard back from Alfred Kieser on July 14, 2002:

Dear authors,
We finally received the reviewers' comments to your paper on The Treatment of History in Organization Studies. They are attached. You can read them for yourself so that I don't have to reiterate them in detail.

…
If you do decide to rewrite your paper … I very much hope you do, the reviewers and I would appreciate if you could explain what you could – or couldn’t do – in response to the reviewers’s comments.
Looking forward to receiving the revised manuscript by the end of August/beginning of September.

Best wishes,
Alfred

This was a formidable invitation to revise and resubmit given the stance of the two reviewers. Reviewer 1 was most critical and two out of the five paragraphs from the review were particularly dismissive:

[paragraph 2]
At this point, I begin to struggle with the author(s)' presentation that the views of organizational economics, organizational sociologists, organizational culturists represent theoretical frameworks for organization studies. None of these collections of people, I feel, have any touch with real organizations. Academics theorize and jargonize and stretch macro theoretical discussions, scarcely without reaching reality. Why is it so seldom that any of these people are called to consult with an on-going enterprise? Because, in my opinion, they have no credibility with practitioners.

[paragraph 4]
Can the author strip away the platitudes, the academic posturing, the glossy jargon, and get down to basics? Nowhere do I see words like authority, responsibility, communication, coordination, purpose, and other words or phrases that describe problems and situations which organizations and their managers grapple with every day.

Reviewer 2 was more encouraging but felt that we were trying to do too much, which was particularly helpful in forcing us to drop our empirical illustration of an analytically structured
narrative. Even so Reviewer 2 maintained that our criticism of most business historians as common sense empiricists was unfounded:

*It nevertheless seems unlikely that the authors have a solid knowledge of the current research in business history, especially of the kind that is usually published in Business History. The explicit policy of this journal is to publish theory-informed articles (even if not all of those published would fulfill this requirement).*

As is often the case we felt that we needed to respond to the reviewers at length in order to convince the editors of both the journal and the special issue that we had taken the reviewers’ comments seriously enough for them to include our article, even though I strongly suspect that Reviewer 1 was in favor of rejecting it. However, it was in response to Reviewer 2 that we added a subtitle for clarification, “Toward an historic turn.” And we explained to Reviewer 2 that, “We feel that this adds greatly to the paper as a discussion piece and that labelling our purpose in this way makes it much clearer.” The extent of our revisions, and our detailed response to the editors and reviewers, must have been sufficient for Alfred and Behlül to accept our paper, but even though it was not sent out for another round of reviews, it was not until April 2004 that we finally received the proofs for our article which was thankfully included in the Special Issue published in the July issue of *Business History* that year.

I have read too many letters, and even articles, from authors complaining about the comments from reviewers. So I can’t complain about the comments from the *Business History* reviewers, which undoubtedly helped us to sharpen up what was a vast and sprawling paper that was weighed down with too many digressions and an attempt to provide an empirical illustration of the kind of history we were advocating. Perhaps most importantly it was the reviewers who prompted us to include the “historic turn” in our subtitle, albeit with an ironic question mark. But the comments were far more extensive than the single review I received for my first ever published article, also in *Business History* (Rowlinson, 1988). What this illustrates is that although there may well have been some general convergence towards an historic turn, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that our article naming it as such would be published when it was with that subtitle. The special issue of *Business History* undoubtedly would have gone ahead even if we had not managed to respond to the reviewers sufficiently for our article to be included. So I wonder how significant it was that the historic turn acquired the name at that particular time?

**A personal turn to history**

My personal turn to history started a long time before our *Business History* article, when I began my PhD at Aston University in 1983. My thesis (Rowlinson, 1987) was a history of labor management at Cadbury, the British cocoa and chocolate manufacturer, from 1879 to 1919. I undertook the archival research in the library at Bournville in South West Birmingham where the Cadbury factory was relocated in 1879 from central Birmingham. I mostly looked at the minutes of various meetings, such as the Bournville Works Councils, and in particular the Cadbury Board Minutes, which started from 1899. I should say that I had no training in archival research. My first degree was in Sociology, not History, and I haven’t formally studied history since I was at school, aged around 14. I have no qualifications in history whatsoever.

Before I started the research for my PhD my supervisor suggested that I should talk to a historian who was interested in the history of labor management, so I went down to the London School of Economics to talk to Howard Gospel, who was later to be the external examiner for my thesis. When Gospel realized that I had no historical training and no experience of archival
research he more or less tried to dissuade me from doing the thesis, suggesting that I might be better advised to write a general history of the labor process rather than try to tackle an actual archive, which he assured me would be more or less impenetrable for a novice like me. To some extent he was right, but what he said was also a challenge, and I spent four years buried in the Cadbury archive in effect learning how to do archival historical research on the job, which is almost certainly the best way even if it is time-consuming. Having finished the thesis I was then faced with the difficulty of getting articles published, and once my first article on scientific management at Cadbury had been published in *Business History* it was made fairly clear to me that if I wanted a career in reputable business schools I would have to publish in leading business and management journals, not specialist historical journals.

I managed to get two more articles from my thesis published in leading journals. The first article in *Human Relations* (Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993), co-authored with John Hassard, used the historical concept of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992) to explain how Cadbury’s labor management institutions had come to be so closely identified with Quakerism. I think this anticipated the current interest in memory and history in organization studies. The second article in the *Journal of Management Studies* (Rowlinson, 1995) focused on divisionalization at Cadbury in the 1960s and it reminds me how important Chandler’s (1962) *Strategy and Structure* was for me at that time.

Before I went for the interview for the scholarship to do my PhD at Aston my undergraduate dissertation supervisor, Theo Nichols, suggested that I read *Strategy and Structure*. This saved me because one of the interviewers had advised me to read Bernard Alford’s (2013: first published in 1973) history of the Bristol tobacco company, W. D. & H. O. Wills, presumably because I was a student at Bristol University where Alford was a professor in the Economic History department – or at least I think he was even though I can’t find any trace of the department on the internet, which gives some indication about the current state of economic history in the UK.

Bristol University boasts of its Wills Memorial Building, a mock gothic monstrosity that opened in 1925 and stands at the top of a steep hill in central Bristol, a reminder of the university’s connection with the tobacco industry. It still houses the law department and when I was a student many of the wealthy lawyers congregated in the entrance hall for a lunchtime social event known as “Wills at One.” As a lifelong socialist and non-smoker I have to say that reading a history of Wills held no attraction because of everything the word “Wills” conjured up for me, and even when I dipped into the book I couldn’t make much sense of it. Fortunately that was more or less what the interviewers wanted to hear.

Remembering this I looked up Alford’s book on Google Scholar and read the preface, which exemplifies the objectivism of business history that I’ve found increasingly annoying:

> This history was commissioned by the Firm in 1965. From the outset, however, Wills agreed that it should be an objective study; and this implied acceptance of the principle that the Firm’s shortcomings and failures should be treated as openly and as fully as its successes.

> Indeed, this is the only worthwhile approach to business history …

*(Alford, 2013: xii, emphasis added)*

The insertion of the word “however” makes it appear as if Wills’ agreement that the study should be objective was somehow exceptional, as if other commissioned histories were not objective, or as if the reader might be surprised that Wills’ would agree to “an objective study.” But in almost every corporate history that I have ever looked at which was commissioned from an academic historian, the author makes a similar statement proclaiming objectivity (Delahaye et al., 2009). As we argue out in our *Academy of Management Review* article:
the ideological content of corporate history is contained in its objectivist form and founder-centered emplotment, which would be compromised by any hint of distortion or lack of independence. The content of the form of corporate history is inimical to explicit theoretical considerations of historical epistemology.

(Rowlinson, Hassard & Decker, 2014: 263)

From the outset of my own turn to history, then, I think I sensed that not only is this not “the only worthwhile approach to business history,” but that it is a largely pointless approach which underpins the unreflexive empiricism in business history.

I’d like to say something about the context in which I did my PhD. Aston was of course the home of the Aston Studies, which must rank as the most successful UK research program ever in organization studies, or even in business and management as a whole. Just about every organizational sociologist in the UK seemed to have passed through the Aston Studies at some point and it constituted an important network. Strange as it may seem I hadn’t even heard of the Aston Studies when it came to finding a PhD scholarship, but it turned out that Theo Nichols had some link to the Aston Studies and knew John Child. In my undergraduate degree the emphasis was on economic or industrial sociology, with a largely Marxist orientation which was reflected in the influential Marxist primer that Theo Nichols (1980) had put together. This was probably the high point for Bravermania in undergraduate sociology and *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman, 1974) had already acquired the status of a sacred text. Some years later when I told Theo Nichols that for my first lecturing job I had to teach “Organizational Behavior” he said something like, “Oh yes, I managed to save you from all that when you were an undergraduate.”

Whenever I talk about the historic turn it seems that someone, usually a distinguished professor, gets up in an agitated state and says that all of this talk of a historic turn overlooks the importance of history for the founders of strategy and organization theory, recounting a list of important figures that might include names such as Weber, Selznick, and Chandler. This is understandable and I usually nod in appreciation of this timely reminder that much of what we are saying has been said before much more eloquently, and we have to be wary of getting carried away with the idea that we have reinvented the wheel.

But having studied at Aston in the aftermath of the Aston Studies it is hardly likely that I would think that previous generations of organizational scholars had no interest in history. One of my PhD supervisors was John Child whose own academic career started with a history of British Management Thought (Child, 2012: first published in 1969), and his historical article on “Quaker Employers” (Child, 1964) framed my own postgraduate research on Cadbury. If strategic choice (Child, 1972) can be seen as a diachronic a qualification to the synchronic excess of structural contingency theory in the original Aston Studies, then the Work Organization Research Centre (WORC) that I joined at Aston in 1983 allowed for the realization of a more historical approach in each of its major case studies, with funding specifically earmarked for my historical research in the Cadbury case study (Smith, Child & Rowlinson, 1990). I think of the ‘firm-in-sector’ approach that Peter Clark (Whipp & Clark, 1986) developed with other members of WORC as a theoretical underpinning for the case studies as kind of nascent historical version of new institutionalism, although I don’t think that link has ever been explicitly made.

Even if as a research program structural contingency can be criticized for its emphasis on cross-sectional correlations, as individuals central members of the Aston Studies are well known for their interest in history. Derek Pugh in particular has a longstanding interest in history, and his successive editions of *Organization Theory: Selected Classic Readings* (Pugh, 2007), along with *Writers on Organization* (Pugh & Hickson, 2007), constitute a standard reference for the history of management and organization theory.
The annual International Labour Process Conferences started in 1983 and for the first few years they alternated between UMIST (now part of Manchester Business School) and Aston. The first one I attended was probably in 1984. At the outset Labor Process Theory was more historically oriented, with historical case studies constituting part of its original corpus (Zimbalist, 1979; Nichols, 1980). I’m not sure when, how, or why Labor Process Theory became disconnected from history, but I have always envisaged Critical Management Studies as offering a possible reconnection (Rowlinson, Stager Jacques & Booth, 2009).

Conclusion

Our call for a ‘historic turn’ was in a sense ironic and retrospective. The rising research programs of organizational economics, new institutionalism, and organizational symbolism may have appeared, or claimed to be more historical than the neoclassical economic theory of the firm or structural contingency theory. But on closer inspection each of the newly dominant paradigms turned out to harbor ahistorical or even anti-historical tendencies. These tendencies have been played out and somewhat to my surprise the advocates of a more historical orientation, such as Roy Suddaby (Suddaby, Foster & Mills, 2014) and Howard Aldrich (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2014) appear to be in the ascendancy. Of course this ascendancy should not be exaggerated. Most researchers continue doing what they do largely untouched by various turns, and if we take the historical implications of ecological, evolutionary, and institutional theory seriously that is presumably what we would expect. Genuine paradigm shifts are likely to be rare, so referring to a ‘turn’ makes a much more modest and less contestable claim of a perceptible change than a paradigm shift.

It was seemingly coincidental that our call for a historic turn was published when it was as the subtitle was only added for clarification in response to a critical reviewer after several versions of the paper had already been presented, or in the case of the Academy of Management, rejected. But if it provides a convenient label for an emerging network of scholars then it has more than served its purpose. Now that this network is becoming more established it seems appropriate for us to create our own etiological myths, and it would be gratifying if our article continues to be seen as the origin of the historic turn to describe a more self-consciously historical orientation within organization studies. This confirms to me the point that we made in the *Academy of Management Review* (Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014), borrowing from Ricoeur, that a “beginning consists in a constellation of dated [or even undated] events” (Ricoeur, 2004: 139), whereas the origin of an organization or a concept, or in this case a ‘turn’, is “a mythic event that requires a single, readily identifiable date and, preferably, an identifiable founder.” An historic turn is something we will only recognize in retrospect, historically, when we look back and try to identify a turning point.

References


Revisiting the historic turn


