

## Special issue on debates in management history

We would like to say from the offset that this special issue of the *Journal of Management History (JMH)* is better labeled “Selected Debates in Management and Organization History.” As with all accounts of history, our story is the outcome of selected viewpoints and experiences of the past.

Our story, in this case, begins with the well-known tale of calls for an historic turn (Booth and Rowlinson, 2006) in *Management and Organization Studies (MOS)*. Here, the astute reader will note that we have chosen to start with one particular call – that of Booth and Rowlinson (2006), as opposed, for example, to Kieser (1994), Burrell (1984), Clegg and Dunkerley (1980), Zald (1989), Jacques (1996) or even Clark and Rowlinson (2004). In part our decision to start with Booth and Rowlinson (2006) is due to the fact that they link their argument for an historic call to those selected authors (Kieser, Burrell, etc.). In other words, the Booth and Rowlinson’s article strongly influenced, which scholars were consequently and subsequently identified as part of the early call for an historic turn. In part, our choice is also due to the fact that, in contrast to Kieser, Zald and others, Booth and Rowlinson shifted the debate from a specific call for an historic turn into an onto-epistemological debate (Mills and Novicevic, 2020) about which scholars, philosophies and methodologies were central to a potential historic turn. It is our summation that the latter set of arguments is the one that found its way into the debates reflected in this issue of *JMH*.

As we shall see, throughout this special issue, there appears to be some merit in the claim that the call for an historic turn has had some effect in shifting attention to the role of history in organizational analysis. This can be witnessed in such things as a proliferation of special issues of *MOS* journals on historiography (MacLean *et al.*, 2015); the respective establishment and revival of *Management and Organizational History (MOH)* and the *JMH* in 2006; the development of new approaches to the study of history and the past, including *Rhetorical History* (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010); ANTi-History (Durepos and Mills, 2012); and genealogical pragmatism (Marshall and Novicevic, 2016); and a revival of sorts of the influence on postmodernism on historical analyses of management and organization studies (see, for example, McKinlay, 2013).

Nonetheless, evidence for an impact of the historic call on management and organization theory is somewhat thin and suggests that *MOH* scholars have been doing the heavy lifting in terms of theory and application (MacLean *et al.*, 2021), whereas mainstream *MOS* scholars have largely ignored the debate. However, even this point cannot be stretched too far, as those engaged in debate around the importance of history to organizational analysis seem to be increasingly involved in theoretical debates rather than developing applied accounts.

### *Toward the special issue*

There can be little doubt that Mick Rowlinson and his colleagues have made a significant impact on the growing sub-field of *MOH*. Here, our use of the term sub-field is intended to suggest that the “historic turn” debate has been not so much across the field of *MOS* but within a smaller realm of *MOH*. This is a smaller realm that largely appears to involve scholars with a particular interest in impacting the larger field of *MOS*. As such, the term sub-field is also meant to suggest a more limited set of outcomes to date (e.g. special *MOH* issues rather than a sustainable change to the historic character of *MOS*).

Before 2018, it is reasonable to say that there had been a number of skirmishes within *MOH* but not open warfare (Toms and Wilson, 2010; Taylor *et al.*, 2009). These skirmishes



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and the coming warfare involved arguments over onto-epistemological positioning within the perceived *MOS* field and certainly the *MOH* sub-field, as to which approach was more capable of overcoming barriers to a fusion of historical and organizational analyses (Greenwood and Bernardi, 2014) and more capable of producing plausible historical accounts (Muldoon, 2019). Now, we readily concede that “warfare” may well exaggerate the experiences of those involved but a change in tone and certain repetitions of attack seem to signal a change in discourse.

*A new history of management.* Things began to change with the publication of *Work, Wealth, and Postmodernism* (Bowden, 2018). In terms of tone, this change reminded us of Donaldson’s (1985) “In Defence of Organization Theory,” which aimed at questioning the legitimacy of postmodernist (and poststructuralist) organizational research. Even Donaldson’s inquisitive style of enquiry is reproduced by Bowden as he appears to spend much time uncovering the supposedly hidden postmodernist roots of certain researchers. This style of enquiry also includes a listing of selective postmodernist scholars and their positions in academic circles, as if to reveal their hidden power and the potential dangers to the field:

*Even where postmodernist frameworks are made explicit, as occurs in Cummings et al.’s (2017) New History of Management – where the authors declare their intention to write a Foucauldian-inspired “counter-history” (p. 40) – the reader is typically presented with uncritical appraisal (Bowden, 2019b, p. 482, our italics).*

One of the primary sources of Bowden’s attack was *A New History of Management* (2017) and its authors – Stephen Cummings, Todd Bridgman, John Hassard and Michael Rowlinson:

The Historic Turn literature also suffers – as does postmodernist research in general – from a tendency to make “factual” assertions that have little basis in objective reality. Proof of this is also easily found. In their recent *A New History of Management*, for example, the authors create an image of the classical economist Adam Smith that little accords with either the textual or the historical evidence [. . .]. From there, however, they made a series of radical assertions of little merit, cherry-picking quotes, with little consideration as to their context (Bowden, 2018, pp. 216–217).

Bowden’s main concern seems to be that certain *MOH* scholars throw around philosophical terms, specifically postmodernism, without having explored its philosophical roots. The problem for Bowden is that a profound lack of understanding of postmodernism (and its modernist counterpart) not only limits the “range of methodological and conceptual tools” of the postmodernists but also weakens the ability of positivist researchers to reduce the influence of postmodernism in *MOH* (Bowden, 2019b, p. 481). In short, Bowden seems to lament the ability of his fellow positivist researchers to minimize postmodernist research within *MOH*. As he puts it: “Despite the growing influence of postmodernism in its various shades within academia, few of its proponents and critics trace its philosophic origins (Bowden, 2019b, p. 481). We will note here that our use of the term ‘fellow’ is quite deliberate because, as discussed below, the debate as a whole has a rather gendered character (Phillips and Rippin, 2010b).

In his critique of anti-positivists, Bowden largely focuses on postmodernists, but he briefly takes time out to recruit ANTi-History to his cause before dismissing its proponents:

Arguably, the most significant attempt to address the internal failings of postmodernist thought in management and organizational studies is found in Gabrielle Durepos and Albert Mills’ concepts of ANTi-History [. . .]. Durepos and Mills are also unusual in acknowledging the failings of postmodernist “relativism”[. . .] conceding the point that it “often” produces “an

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*anything goes* attitude, in which no standards exist to govern academic efforts' (Durepos and Mills, 2012, p. 167–168 – cited in Bowden, 2018, p. 231–232; italics in the original).

Having apparently associated Durepos and Mills with his own perspective, Bowden goes on to critique them as postmodernist allies of Cummins, Rowlinson, Hassard and various other organizational scholars identified as postmodernists [1]. Somehow, not fully explained, being a postmodernist scholar is cast as problematic:

Despite their stated support for “empiricism”, Durepos and Mills still see knowledge as subjective, a social construct of competing “socio-political actors” (Bowden, 2018, p. 233).

Muldoon (2019) and Batiz-Lazo (2019) joined the fray, with complementary articles and editorial support in *JMH* (Bowden, 2019a). Introducing the two articles, Bowden (2019a, 5) refers to them as “highly significant intellectual challenges to the recently published *A New History of Management*: a book co-authored by Cummings *et al.* (2017)”. He goes on to add that the two articles “represent a challenge not only to *A New History of Management* but also to the wider and proliferating type of research that it embodies” (Ibid.). Disappointingly, the editorial goes on support a tone that may have had the adverse effect of closing down rather than opening up debate [2]. Some of the off-putting comments include reference to the *New History* book as taking “a myopic and technically poor approach;” that exhibits “poor scholarship,” “intellectual shallowness” “and a lack of evident intellectual roots.”

*Missing voices.* Although this debate dragged on in its focus on methodological and philosophical issues, there have been some limited attempts to focus on gender and postcoloniality. Phillips and Rippin (2010a, p. 283), for example, set out to “uncover a lost heritage [...] [to reclaim] women in management and organization.” To that end, they produced a special issue on the subject in the journal *MOH*. That this had little obvious impact on the field can be glimpsed through the fact that only a small minority of articles on gender have appeared in the past decade in the *JMH*, *MOH* and *Business History* (Mills and Novicevic, 2020) and that a new call for work on “gender, feminism and business history” is the topic of a 2020 *Business History* special issue. As the editors point out, “this special issue is the first in this field for almost a decade to be dedicated to gender and business and/or organizational history” (Dean *et al.*, 2020) call for papers.

More recently there has been a similar observation about the absence of postcoloniality and voices from the South in the pages of *Business History*, *MOH* and *JMH* (Wanderley and Barros, 2018; Mills and Novicevic, 2020) [3].

As co-editors of the journal *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* (*QROM*) and members of the *JMH* editorial board, we were aware that there was something of a hollow debate between those in the field who identify with Bradley’s positivist perspective and those who self-identify as postmodernists (Cummings *et al.*, 2017) or amodernists (Durepos and Mills, 2012). It struck us that such a debate was lacking three elements – one: a debate across a particular space (e.g. *JMH*) where points and counter points can be discussed symmetrically; two: the voices of those who see themselves at the other end of the “historic turn” debate (e.g. postmodernist *MOH* scholars); and three: the perspectives of the Other who, until now, have been excluded not simply from the debate but by the debate itself (e.g. postcolonial/decolonial and feminist perspectives). With that in mind, we approached Bradley Bowden to propose a collection of papers across the pages of *QROM* and *JMH*. Bradley promptly agreed to this and to the associated structure of the debate.

The first stage was for Bradley Bowden to provide a guest article outlining his approach. This was published in *QROM* at the beginning of 2019 and went over much of the ground covered in his book (Bowden, 2018). Here Bowden specifically focused his critique on

“Empiricism, epistemology and modern postmodernism” (Bowden, 2019b). This was immediately followed in the same issue by a rejoinder by Mollan(2019),[4] who contended that Bowden’s argument served to limit the field of enquiry through its antagonistic positioning. He went on to argue that:

[...] antagonism between different sub-communities undertaking work related to the ‘historic-turn’ in management and organization studies (MOS) should give way to greater acceptance of different “‘phenomenal’ concerns and different methods of research (Mollan, 2019, p. 498).

The next phase of the debate brings us to the current special issue where we agreed that Jean and Bradley would each invite four submissions. The eight papers are constituted as follows:

Bradley Bowden opens with an in-depth analysis of the “historic turn.” Here, he returns to his central theme that “the historic turn” is largely the outcome of postmodernist attempts to dominate the field. He contends that the “historic turn has proved to an “historic wrong turn,” typically associated with confused and contradictory positions. In consequence, Foucault’s belief that knowledge is rooted in discourse, and that both are rooted in external structures of power, is used while simultaneously professing advocacy of White’s understanding that history is fictive, the product of the historian’s imagination.”

In the second paper, the authors – Gabrielle Durepos, Terrance Weatherbee and Albert Mills – present reflection on ANTi-History and the issue of time. They do this through “a critique of the treatment of time in modern and postmodern historical organization studies. Here, they draw on “Lefebvre’s notion of rhythm to theorize time in an amodern condition.” They argue that their “overarching aim is to call on historical organization studies scholars to theoretically engage with time.”

In the third paper, Jeff Muldoon returns with both a critique of postmodernist protagonists of the “historic turn” approach and an appeal for a middle ground between postmodernist and modernist approaches to history. Here, we detect a much welcomed changed in tone coupled with an interesting biographical account of his journey through management and organizational history scholarship. Along the way, Muldoon weighs the pros and cons of a number of postmodernist and amodernist accounts – toward the development of a narrative of a middle ground. Of interest to the reader might also be the differences in the treatment of time between Muldoon’s account and that of Durepos, Weatherbee and Mills. It may also be interesting to assess the extent to which Muldoon (and Bowden) tends to include ANTi-History under the banner of postmodernism – a claim that Durepos and her colleagues do not appear to embrace [5].

The fourth paper brings together Nick Deal, Milorad Novicevic, Albert J. Mills, Caleb Lugar and Foster Roberts. Following on from Muldoon’s appeal for a middle ground, Deal *et al.* set out to “find common ground between the supposed incompatible metahistorical positioning of positivism and post positivism through a turn to mnemo history in management and organizational history.” Here, they draw “on the idea of creative synthesis and positioning theory.” They do this by interjecting concepts from cultural memory studies in historical research on business and organizations to encourage management historians and organization theorists interested in joining the dialogue around how the past is known in the present.” Using notions of “aftermath” and “events,” the idea of positivism is written into historical organization studies to focus on understanding the complex ways of how past events translate into history. The critical historic turn event is raised as an exemplar of these ideas.”

The fifth paper is by Kevin Tennent who, somewhat like Jeff Muldoon, draws on his own biographic experiences to reflect on the direction of the sub-field of *MOH*.

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The paper consists of two segments – the first half is a personal reflection looking at the author's research journey and how the discipline as experienced by the author has evolved over that time. The second half looks forward to consider how we should leverage our strengths as historians to progress our discipline forward.

In some ways, this focus becomes the “historic turn” meets COVID-19, as Kevin reflects on the challenges we face as history scholars in a pandemic environment.

The sixth paper sees the return of Bradley Bowden, this time with his co-author Peta Stevenson-Clarke. Here, the paper takes an interesting turn (pun intended) as the authors:

[...] explore the marked similarities between the critical accounting literature, most particularly that related to the ‘New Accounting History’ and that associated with the ‘Historic Turn’ and ANTi-History in management and organizational studies.

They go on to argue that “many, if not most, of the intellectual positions associated with the ‘Historic Turn’ and ANTi-History [...] were argued in the critical accounting literature long before [Clark and Rowlinson's \(2004\)](#) noted call.” Indeed, they continue, “the ‘call’ for a ‘new accounting history’ issued by Miller, Hopper and Laughlin (1991) played a remarkably similar role to that made by Clark and Rowlinson in management and organization studies more than a decade later.” It would appear that the sub-text of Bowden and Stevenson-Clark's argument is that not only is the “historic turn” “wrong” but also (paradoxically) “old hat.”

The seventh paper is by Nidhi Srinivas who begins by challenging the binary characterization of modernist and postmodernist views of history as “objectivist and subjectivist approaches.” He does this “to consider this binary and the extent it squarely considers the historical interplay between disciplinary knowledge and structures of power within management studies, and from a post-colonial perspective.” Through this critique, Srinivas seeks to frame the debate by considering “historical knowledge and disciplinary power under the rubric of a postcolonial project.” Srinivas then proceeds at length to deconstruct the problematics of the characterizations of modernism and postmodernism to outline the potential for postcolonial studies of the past. To that end, Srinivas provides a sweeping critique of Bowden's notion of modernism and of Cummings *et al.*'s postmodernism to set up his own notion of postcoloniality. He concludes that “current binaries on offer in management history debates share more similarities than acknowledged.” He contends that:

[...] if management history wishes to be more genuinely expansive and attentive to other theories [...] [then] a greater effort is required on both sides of this binary to consider credible ways of engaging with not just the concurrent historical experiences with management that took place outside Anglo-American, but to also attend to silences and omissions within dominant debates and narratives of such history in itself, to those who have become ‘too silent to be real’.

Our final paper is by Marta Calas and Linda Smircich, who comment on the work of feminist epistemology by drawing on their own experiences from the development of feminist organization studies. In the process, they develop a critique of management and organization studies from a feminist perspective.

It does so by following various intellectual moves in the development of feminist theorizing as they cross over to organization studies, including their analytical possibilities for reclaiming historically the voices of major women scholars.

The critique is narrated through three epistemological activities and the notion of “unmuting,” “mutating” and “mutiny.” It ends in a reflection addressing the state of

business schools at present and why and how the field of organization and management studies needs “mutiny” now. Their approach is influenced by Foucault’s “history of the present” but with contingencies brought about by feminist interpretations. The application of these notions is demonstrated by reclaiming and clarifying the epistemological underpinning in the works of three major women scholars: Mary Parker Follett, Edith Penrose and Rosabeth Moss Kanter. In the process, in the notion of “unmuting,” Linda Smircich and Marta Calas have provided us with a key strategy for challenging the gendered nature of *MOS* and *MOH* – an approach that, we note, draws on an openly embraced feminist approach to Foucault’s work.

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#### Notes

1. On pages 202 and 213, [Bradley Bowden \(2018\)](#) lists various names of assumed postmodernist scholars, including Durepos and Mills, and their influence in *MOH*.
2. [Bradley Bowden \(2019a\)](#), p. 6 reports that “he provided a copy of Batiz-Lazo’s article to the authors of the *New History of Management* with an invitation to respond. This invitation . . . was to respond to not only Batiz-Lazo’s article but also Muldoon’s.” Given the tone of the articles, it is perhaps not surprising that the *New History* authors did not take up the offer!
3. Wanderley and Barros’ paper appeared in a Special Issue of *MOH* on “Imperialism and Coloniality in *Management and Organizational History*,” Issue 14 (1), February 2019, edited by Simon Mollan.
4. Other protagonists were also invited to comment but for various reasons declined.
5. Full disclosure – we view ourselves as ANTi-History scholars.

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