

Reconciling History and Organization Theory: Challenges and Prospects of a Hermeneutical Program of Inquiry

Tarih ve Örgüt Kuramını Uzlaştırmak: Yorumlayıcı Bir Araştırma Programının Zorlukları ve Sağladığı İmkânlar

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Abstract

One of the hottest debates in the past two decades in the business history domain seems to revolve around as to whether organizational theory and history can be reconciled in such a way that one does not prevail over the other. Although recent suggestions display a potential to guide business history scholars, further elaboration on the relationship between history and organization theory is required due to the increasing expectations for theoretical contribution by top-tier journals. In this study, we try to reveal the potential contributions of the hermeneutical research method to the above-mentioned debate by unfolding the ontological, epistemological, and methodological similarities between history as a distinct discipline and hermeneutical philosophy. Moreover, with the aim of contributing to the relevant literature, our study lays out the issues that need special consideration while applying the hermeneutical method in business history research.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, business history, organization studies, transdisciplinary research, historical methods

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Özet

İşletmecilik tarihi yazınında son yirmi yıla damgasını vuran önemli tartışmalardan birisi örgütsel kuram ile tarihin biri diğerine üstün gelmeyecek şekilde uzlaştırılıp uzlaştırılmayacağı hususunda düğümlemiş görünmektedir. Yakın zamanda ortaya atılan önermeler bu alanda araştırma yapacak akademisyenlerin çalışmalarına yön verecek nitelikte olmakla birlikte, üst düzey akademik dergilerin işletmecilik tarihi alanında yapılan çalışmalardan kuramsal katkı bekliyor olmaları tarih ve kuram arasındaki ilişkinin daha açık bir şekilde ortaya konması gerektiğini göstermektedir. Bu çalışmamızda, yorumlayıcı söylem analizi yönteminin yukarıda belirtilen tartışmaya sağlayabileceği katkıları başlı başına bilimsel bir disiplin olan tarih ile yorumlamacı felsefenin ontolojik, epistemolojik ve yöntemsel benzerliklerini ortaya koyarak göstermeye çalıştık. İlaveten, çalışmamız tarihsel araştırmalarda yorumlayıcı yöntemin kullanılması halinde dikkat edilmesi gereken hususları da sıralayarak ilgili yazına katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Hermenötik, işletmecilik tarihi, örgüt çalışmaları, disiplinler arası araştırmalar, tarihsel araştırma yöntemleri

Introduction

Scholars have long tried to situate history in paradigm maps on equal footing with organization theory (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004) and, by doing so, they have strived to legitimize further management and organizational history studies in the organizational theory domain (Decker, 2016). Whereas some scholars reject the possibility of such a clear-cut reconciliation (Leblebici, 2014) or reduce history to hypothesis testing (de Jong, Higgins, & van Driel, 2015), others diligently advocate alternative ways of integrating history and theory (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2017; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

We deem that the hermeneutical approach to history offers promising avenues to tackle this fundamental obstacle and present a fertile path towards reconciliation (Basque & Langley, 2018; Blagoev, Felten, & Kahn, 2018; Maclean et al., 2016, 2017). Thus, the objective of this study is to reveal possible contributions of a hermeneutical research program for the reconciliation of existing conflicts in bringing history and organizational theory together. However, achieving such a goal requires elucidating philosophical debates over the past and reflexivity (Lorenz, 2011: 14). In this respect, in the remainder of this paper, we first elaborate on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological compatibility between history and hermeneutics by unraveling their overlapped historical and philosophical backgrounds. In the aftermath, we briefly review business history studies to demonstrate the scholarly awareness of and the burgeoning keen interest in the promising avenues

provided by hermeneutical discourse analysis. Next, we heed attention to the critiques and the expedient caveats about hermeneutical discourse analysis. We finalize our paper with several concluding remarks on the possible pivotal roles to be played by hermeneutics in the integration of history and theory.

Meta-Theoretical Considerations: Hermeneutics, History, and Being

Having conceptualized the debate in this way, the conflation of history and theory may potentially be overcome by advocating a pluralist stance in integration, which refers to borrowing concepts from both disciplines and enriching organizational research paradigms by imbuing them with various historical research traditions (Decker, 2016). One caveat in so doing comes to the fore as “the epistemological and ontological problem of representing the past” (ibid. 10). When it comes to history, to find a unified ontological and epistemological ground becomes a challenging task (Rowlinson et al., 2014: 268) since all presuppositions regarding the nature of historical knowledge and the way of achieving this knowledge are intertwined (Lorenz, 2011: 20).

The ontological subject matter of history pertains to whether it is merely a collection of objectively retrievable past events (Novick, 1988), or is there different versions of it reproduced by historians (Ricoeur, 1984). Historical realism describes history as an untold story of facts waiting to become discovered and then reproduced faithfully in isolation from historian reflexivity (Rowlinson et al., 2014: 253). This way of conceptualizing history assumes a past reality that is markedly distinct from the present, absolutely convenient for objectification, and readily present for reliable measurement. However, for some scholars, such an understanding of history renders the historical complexities disconnected from their sociopolitical and historical contexts. In addition, the conflation of history and past overlooks the impact of time, thereby conceiving theories or concepts immune to change (Weatherbee, 2012: 205).

On the other hand, as Hegel advocated, “... history unites the objective with the subjective side. We must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events” (quoted in White, 1987: 11-12). The credibility of history requires, above all, to acknowledge that “I” is a historical being, and the person studying history is also the one who is making

history. That is, the historical knowledge is possible insofar as the subject and the object display homogeneity rather than dissociation (Gadamer, 1975/2013: 225). This is so, because, as a subject of this social world, one connects with reality through the sustenance of one's experience about and understandings of that social reality (Edwards, 2019).

Laying the foundation of philosophical hermeneutics, Heidegger posited hermeneutics as a phenomenological explanation of human existence based on lived experiences. He emphasized the nature of Being as an entity, Dasein (man's existence or Being in the world), and argued that the entity is nothing but oneself for each human Being and includes many possibilities of itself as Being (Heidegger, 1927/1962: 27). This approach paves the way for multiple possible understandings of self and others as an entity. In Heideggerian terms, understanding is inherent in interpretation (hermeneutics) and vice versa, and Dasein's interpretation reflects both its prior knowledge and actual pragmatic interests about other entities (Horrigan-Kelly, 2016: 3). Thus, personal experience of Being should be a major scholarly concern, since being human in the world means weaving the fabric of subject and object that are culturally and historically conditioned (Gill, 2014: 120). As for the connection between hermeneutics and history, "neither events nor structures, nor indeed historical time itself, can be comprehended without grasping their production through the conceptual, hermeneutic nature of Dasein" (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2006: 163).

Concomitantly, this convergence between the historian/object and history/subject translates into an epistemological inquiry around whether the nature of historical knowledge is empirical and law-like or hermeneutical and narrative-like (Lorenz, 2011: 21). The hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is "... a specific historical self-reflexive epistemological style with the underlying assumption that no concluding, a-historically guaranteed knowledge, no final theory of society exists" (Meyer, 2006: 726). At this point, Jenkins (1991/2003: 7) clarifies the distinction between the past and history and rejects the idea that just one unique reading of the past is possible. The past has already gone; still, it draws the attention of different historians with different reflexivities. Not surprisingly, this differentiation obscures a well-established and unique description of the past. Thus, having described history as discourse lends itself to different readings and interpretations of the past over time and space. This variation depends on who is reading and/or has written history (sociologists, historians, economists, and the like). Building on Jenkins's argument, Bell and Taylor (2013: 132) eloquently articulate that each

historian creates, constructs, constitutes, and situates history in line with his/her reflexivity. The possibility of multiple social and historical realities and the historian's embeddedness into these constructed realities bring forward the nature and extent of historical reflexivity as the next perplexing inquiry regarding the connection between history and hermeneutics (Decker, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2020).

The horizon of Dasein determines the extent and demarcates the boundaries of reflexivity since it represents our non-extendable and non-passable cognitive limits and provides us to engage in our intellectual activities. Acting both as a facilitator and a barrier, on the one hand, the horizon enables us to understand a given phenomenon with its relevance to the world; on the other, it restricts us by demarcating a boundary beyond which grasping phenomena becomes impossible (Heidegger [trans.], 1927/1962). However, Gadamer (1975/2013) advocates that going beyond one's horizon is not a necessity to understand this beyond-horizon zone or enlarge our intellectual horizon. To wit, the horizon is not merely an insurmountable boundary. He explicitly states that "... [human life] is never absolutely bound to one stand-point, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is something into which we move, and that moves with us. It changes for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, ..., is always in motion. In historical consciousness, the motion of the surrounding horizon becomes aware of itself" (ibid. 315).

This ontological and epistemological compatibility between history and hermeneutics opens fruitful avenues of inquiry for management and organizational history scholars. If conceptualized as the purpose of a given business history research, interpretation displays the potential of explaining the form and origins of contemporary organizational phenomena by employing a narrative mode of research (Maclean et al., 2016). Given that history is the narrative representation of the past with a particular and implicit purpose in itself, multiple histories, which constitute a plethora of discourses, substitute the single allegedly objective history (Bell & Taylor, 2013: 132).

Constructing a Hermeneutical Program for Historical Inquiry: Challenges and Prospects

Given the above-delineated epistemological congruence between history and hermeneutics, the former manifests itself in written or oral texts that lend them-

selves to hermeneutical discourse analysis. Discourse, which is a particular way of representing the physical and social world (Fairclough, 2005), refers to "... a structured collection of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide array of visual representations and cultural artifacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated, and consumed" (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004: 3). Hermeneutical discourse analysis probes the specific use of language in these texts, say, historical texts in line with our discussion, and associates discourse with intertextuality (the constellation of texts in which a given text is nested) so that the coherence and evolution of the concepts and ideas under a given discourse [history] become meaningful (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). Correspondingly, historical discovery generally relies on the collected, sorted, organized, cataloged, and reserved texts and documents (Ocasio, Mausekapp, & Steele, 2016). Among these texts, historians generally embark on primary sources, which are documentary records and testimonies of the past, since they suggest first-hand information (Lipartito, 2014).

In a nutshell, approaching historical texts with hermeneutical analysis provides valuable opportunities to harmonize history and theory since hermeneutic tradition strongly encourages repetitive iterations between theory and (historical) texts (Prasad, 2002). Bearing this benefit in mind, organizational scholars have long used this qualitative technique for unfolding discursive mechanisms and hidden meanings prevailing in and around organizations (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Kerr, Robinson, & Elliott, 2016; Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010; McLaren & Mills, 2010; Sanderson, Parsons, Mills, & Mills, 2010). Similarly, following from the promising avenues of historically informed theoretical research, business historians also applied hermeneutical discourse analysis to generate a fusion among various understandings extracted from narrated histories (Costea et al., 2006; Hartt et al., 2009; McLaren & Mills, 2010; Olavarría-Gambi, 2018; Paroutis, Mckeown, & Collinson, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2010; Taylor, Bell, & Cooke, 2009).

As elaborately discussed above, hermeneutics and history share remarkable commonalities on ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds. Amid the concerns regarding history-theory reconciliation, hermeneutical discourse analysis stands out as a proper fit to achieve such rapprochement between two disciplines. However, some methodological caveats urge researchers to be attentive to possible shortcomings of hermeneutical discourse analysis. The most

avored critique revolves around scientific concerns, that is, despite optimistic expectations from interpretive research (Prasad & Prasad, 2002), there have still been severe doubts regarding the applicability and scientific value of hermeneutics (Davey, 2017). In this respect, the studies based on a hermeneutical methodology have to articulate their analytical framework with a thorough prospectus of the iterative cyclic analysis (Prasad & Mir, 2002).

The second challenge, while engaging in hermeneutical analysis, pertains to the biasedness of the historian/interpreter. Historical consciousness is associated with one's awareness regarding the impact of prejudices on one's understanding, prejudices that stem from one's historicity influencing the interpretation of given phenomena (Smythe & Spence, 2012: 13). The interpreter is not immune from prejudices or tradition, yet, historical consciousness helps him/her emancipate from counterproductive prejudices so that a healthy conversation takes place between him/her and the text (Prasad, 2002). As suggested by Kipping and colleagues (2014: 325), the researcher tackles possible interpreter alienation with the text by a comprehensive analysis of temporal, cultural, and social context, where the text production occurs. The context introduction is compulsory because the social construction of reality through discourse is a reciprocal process between context, intertextuality, and text production (Fairclough, 1989, 2005).

Finally, from the Gadamerian viewpoint, the dialogue between the interpreter/historian and the text is the key for hermeneutical analysis and becomes productive as long as the fusion of horizon is accomplished among counterparts of this conversation (Vessey, 2009: 531). Hermeneutics is nothing but a continuous conversation among context, text, and interpreter's pre-understandings and prejudices (Robinson & Kerr, 2015: 779). The critical point at this mutually constituting interaction is whether a conversation results in a fusion of horizons between the above-laid-out partners of the dialogue. Therefore, the final caveat is to establish and sustain the fusion of horizons. To achieve this goal is possible by employing a systematic analytical procedure (Phillips & Brown, 1993) based on equal attention to (i) social-historical, formal, and interpretation/reinterpretation moments (Ricoeur, 1973) and (ii) the intentional, referential, contextual, conventional, and structural aspects of texts (Thompson, 1990: 137).

Concluding Remarks: On The Role of Reflexivity, Plurality, and Archives

Our concluding remarks on the history/theory integration rely on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological congruence between history and hermeneutics. Although we do not rule out alternative research efforts for integration (Decker, 2016), we join Maclean et al. (2016) and Rowlinson and Hassard (2013) that the purpose of historical research constitutes the primary criterion to determine the essence of reconciling history and organization theory in an integrative way. In this vein, our first conclusion is that the researcher's ontological and epistemological position plays a pivotal role in making decisions on achieving such integration.

Drawing on phenomenological ontology and hermeneutical epistemology supersedes the past/present duality with the notion of the uninterrupted flow of time. Such a transition from 'history as told' to 'history as experienced' (Lubinski, 2018) has recently transformed past into a collective memorial inventory (Blagoev et al., 2018) to be used for the maintenance and demarcation of institutional fields (Thomas, Wilson, & Leeds, 2013), the transformation of organizational forms (Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2018), the creation of organizational identity (Oertel & Thommes, 2018), and the strategic adaptation in the face of environmental threats (Smith & Simeone, 2017). As our second conclusion, building on the very recent arguments on historical reflexivity (Decker et al., 2020), we recommend business historians to benefit more frequently and deliberately from rhetorical analysis (Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009), framing analysis (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), and narrative analysis (White, 1987) to achieve what Decker (2016) calls as the pluralist integration between history and organizational theory.

Finally, we would like to heed attention to the generally underestimated, yet very beneficial, role of archives in the business history domain (Decker, 2013). We believe that the distant past is available to our cognition through archival documents since the aforementioned rhetorical history may not necessarily be delivered to the present time due to the lack of narrators who have witnessed the focal past. As Ocasio et al. (2016) aptly put, archives are both the representatives of the unknown past and the constructors of our society's memory by which we can learn about history. In the absence of witnesses of the distant past, archives undertake reminder and narrator role, provided that the researcher takes carefully

into account historical context while reflecting the time in narratives (Auerbach, 1946/2003; Prasad, 2002; Ricoeur, 1984). Thus, our last conclusion posits that hermeneutical discourse analysis may prove useful to decipher archives and integrate them with their socio-historical context, contributing significantly to the elaboration and possible extension of arguments in organizational theory.

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