Special Issue Introduction

Historical Research on Institutional Change

Abstract

Both business historians and organization studies scholars study institutional change to understand the interactions between business and society. However, research approaches differ fundamentally, with organizational research focusing on theory-driven explanations, whereas historical research is rather theory-informed. The consequence of such disciplinary orientation is that interdisciplinary conversations rarely occur. For this special issue, we invited submissions that address how historical research can contribute to our understanding of institutional change while demonstrating "dual integrity" in terms of being significant pieces of historical research that provide us with new insights into historiography, while at the same time addressing important theoretical concerns.

Institutional change, by its very nature, is a concept that is of relevance to both business historians and organization studies scholars. Both groups of scholars recognize the importance of institutions for the way in which business and society interact. But as Rowlinson and Hassard have pointed out, the way in which scholars make sense of institutions for their research is strikingly different: historical neo-institutionalism is theory-driven, uses constructed evidence and explicit research designs, whereas neo-institutionalist history is theory-informed, that is theory is used to organize found evidence, the provenance of which is discussed in detail (and in footnotes).[1] Both approaches are shaped by different disciplinary aims: historical neo-institutionalism aims to build or extend theory as a valid contribution to knowledge, whereas neo-institutionalist history employs the concept of institutions as a conceptual framework that contributes to historiography and therefore extends our knowledge and understanding of the past.

The consequence of such disciplinary orientation is that interdisciplinary conversations do not take place, and each group of scholars fails to engage with the insights developed by the other.[2] Nevertheless, there have been repeated calls in recent years to expand interdisciplinary research between history and organization studies that shows "dual integrity" and "historical cognizance".[3] Empirical examples of such work have remained scarce, particularly on institutional change, which, in Suddaby and Greenwood's words, refers to 'the displacement of one set of institutionalized arrangements by another, or, the significant modification of prevailing arrangements either substantively (in that the arrangements themselves change) *or* symbolically (in that the meanings associated with the arrangements change)'. [4]

The editors of this special issue felt that it was time to address this gap. How historical research can contribute to our understanding of institutional change was the subject of the standing working group in history and organization studies at the annual European Group for Organization Studies colloquium in 2015. Subsequently we invited submissions to an open call for a special issue in *Business History*. Both the conference stream and the special issue were oversubscribed, and generated a large number of original research contributions. For this special issue we selected those articles that, we believe, did justice to the high threshold of "dual integrity" in that they are significant pieces of historical research in their own right, providing us with new insights into historiography, while at the same time addressing important theoretical concerns.[5]

Each contribution draws on different aspects of institutional theory, and very different historical settings: US banking in the nineteenth and twentieth century, US freemasonry in the early nineteenth century, US music industry record pooling practices in the twentieth century, Finnish hypermarkets in the twentieth century, US baseball and British building societies in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Their insights from these historical processes draw on, and

contribute to, different aspects of the extensive, at times even labyrinthine, literature on institutional theory, such as institutional fields, institutional work, historical institutionalism, legitimacy theory, formal and informal institutions and considerations of data and sources, thus encompassing both micro- and macro-institutional analysis.

For the readers of *Business History*, some aspects of the theoretical literature may be unfamiliar, as this type of neo-institutional theory has had its origin in sociology rather than in the neo-institutional economics literature that drew heavily on North's influential book *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.[6] As a field, business history has maintained long-standing conversations with a variety of disciplines, and in recent years a number of new avenues for research have emerged, one of which is the dialogue between history and organization studies.[7] In parallel to a recent special issue by de Jong and Higgins on "New Business Histories", we present research in another new area for business history: management and organizational history.[8] Given the interdisciplinary nature of this field, we provide a brief overview of the theoretical literature relevant to organizational research into institutional change, followed by a brief discussion of our six contributions in this special issue.

Neo-institutional theory and organization history

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.'[9] Its potential relevance to historical enquiry has been pointed out by Suddaby et al., 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.[10] Likewise, Suddaby and Greenwood have singled out historical approaches as one of the main ways for studying institutional change.[11] Institutional theory in organization studies has developed two influential approaches to researching change: the role of agency in institutional change and institutional logics.

Agency in Institutional Theory: Institutional Entrepreneurship and Institutional Work[12]

What is termed the 'old' institutional theory, epitomized for example by the work of Selznick 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.[13] 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 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).[14] DiMaggio and Powell's 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).[15]

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.[16] As a result institutional theory tended to explain stability better than change, and DiMaggio and Powell 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, and Seo and Creed have highlighted, these attempts to reintroduce agency into neo-institutionalism gave rise to what is known as the paradox of embedded agency.[17] How can individuals change the institutional frameworks in which they are embedded, and which to them appear as the most normal, straightforward and logical solutions to problems of social interaction?

The concept of institutional entrepreneurship has been elaborated further in this context. Institutional entrepreneurs are actors 'who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones'.[18] This has been, however, criticised as an overly muscular and heroic conception of agency, even though there have been attempts to link institutional entrepreneurship more closely to its alternative, the institutional work literature.[19] Institutional work, on the other hand, draws more heavily on practice as a micro-foundation for institutional research.[20] 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).

In response to these criticisms, institutional work presented a more comprehensive conception of agency than 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'.[21] 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 institutional work focuses on how agency affects institutions, it views agency as a multi-level phenomenon, in which the societal, organizational and individual levels are nested within each other.[22] Again, this underscores the similarities to historical research, which emphasizes the (multiple) contexts and temporalities of the events or phenomena under consideration.[23]

Of these three levels, institutional work is mostly concerned with the individual one, which had previously remained under-theorized. Battilana and D'Aunno have combined Emirbayer and Mische's work on different types of agency (habitual, practical, projective) with the different types of institutional agency (creating, maintaining, disruptive).[24] 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 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.'[25] This inertial view of the past is at odds with the more emancipatory conception of the past in historical research, which often implicitly assumes that learning from the past is necessary to engender change in the present and the future. This suggests that despite some common concerns, the past 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 field 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.[26] 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 actor'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, marginal or in-between figures within their respective fields may depend on the field characteristics, as empirical work has come to contradictory conclusions in this regard.[27] 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.'[28] Distributed agency has been the subject of several studies 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.[29]

Of even greater relevance to historians is research on the temporal or evolutionary aspects of institutional work, such as Zietsma's and Lawrence's study of the interplay of boundary work and practice work.[30] 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 depend on the state of the organizational field. They 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.[31] Integrating these concepts into historical research offers a new way of interpreting historical processes.

While hardly an exhaustive review, this suggests some limitations in the current literature on institutional work: with few exceptions, practice-focused studies are limited to investigating short time spans due to their intense research methods that are based on participant observation, interviewing or (video) ethnography. 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.[32] Work on rituals, for example, has combined ethnography and interviews to research present-day dining rituals at Cambridge University, and linked them to the maintenance of the British class system by training the future managerial and professional classes.[33] Yet what such research designs cannot address are the tendency of rituals to cloak themselves in the semblance of antiquity, when historical research often shows that rituals and tradition are far more changeable than it appears.[34] So

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historically informed organization studies could gain further insights from engaging more with historical research into institutional work.

Institutional Logics

In contrast to research on agency and institutions, which is concerned with practices and the micro-foundations of institutions, institutional logics refer to the belief system through which individuals interpret their world. The notion of institutional logics was introduced by Friedland and Alford who conceived society as an "inter-institutional system" comprising a range of central institutional orders, such as the market, the state, the family, democracy and the Christian religion in present-day capitalist Western societies.[35] Each of these societal-level institutions, Friedland and Alford held, has a "central logic", which not only serves to mould individual and organizational interests and behaviour but is also available for further elaboration. The multiplicity of institutional orders and logics imply potential contradictions in influencing individual and organizational actions. Apart from acknowledging that the institutional orders that were identified pertained to contemporary Western societies, Friedland and Alford also suggested that the associated institutional logics were historically limited.[36]

The idea of institutional logics was soon extended to the level of organizational fields. Initially, the aim was to identify dominant logics within fields and shifts over time as well as their implications for organizational structures, processes and outcomes. In one of the early field-level studies, Thornton and Ocasio defined institutional logics as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.'[37] Drawing upon historical and interview data, Thornton and Ocasio were able to identify in their study on the higher education publishing field in the US a shift from what they

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labelled as an "editorial" to a "market" logic. They also demonstrated that the antecedents of executive succession varied in the two periods where each of these institutional logics prevailed. Organizational structure and size were more significant when an editorial logic was dominant within the field, whereas acquisition strategies of firms and the level of competition had greater salience under the subsequent market logic. Thornton's later studies showed additionally that the factors likely to increase the risks of acquisition of these publishing firms and their rate of transition to becoming a division within a multidivisional structure varied across the historical periods in which the editorial or the market logic prevailed.[38]

A number of companion studies at the time have supported and added to the idea that institutional logics and their effects on organizational fields are historically contingent. Rao et al, for example, studied how the logic and the associated role identities of the classical cuisine in French gastronomy were replaced by those of the nouvelle cuisine.[39] They trace first how the classical cuisine became institutionalized during the period from the French revolution until the 1960s, turning then to account for the shift towards the nouvelle cuisine using both interview data and quantitative analysis. Lounsbury added to this stream of literature by studying the effects of transformation in institutional logics on organizational foundings. His study on the field of finance in the US, spanning the period 1945-1993, showed that with the decline of what he referred to as the "regulatory" logic and the rise of the "market" logic as well as the expansion of financial knowledge led to an increase in the founding of professional finance associations.[40] In a similar vein, Haveman and Rao (1997) have studied thrift organizations in California during the period 1865–1928 to examine how institutional logics coevolved with organizational forms.[41] They showed how the institutional logic that they labelled as the "theory of moral sentiments" embodied by a particular organizational form came to be replaced by a number of different "theories" (or

logics) and new organizational forms, ultimately leading to the predominance of a single form and its associated logic. Scott et al. examined institutional change in the U.S. health care field in a study on the San Francisco Bay Area. Tracing transformations in dominant logics over a period of five decades, they identified three historical periods "professional dominance" (1945–1965), "federal involvement" (1966–1982), and "managerial control and market mechanisms" (1983–1990s)] in which different logics prevailed.[42] These authors studied ensuing changes in field governance and ecologies of organizations as well as at the organizational level, showing again that not only the meanings attributed to practices varied across the historical eras, but also the relationships among the variables that were examined.

Despite dealing with varied empirical settings (though all but one in the US), these early studies as well as those that ensued in the first decade of the 2000s share a number of common features. Firstly, institutional change was often considered as transformation in institutional logics, though as discussed above some of these studies were also concerned with the resultant demise and rise of organizational forms. Secondly, there was invariably reference to history and historical analysis. However, in almost all cases "historical analysis" was typically based on secondary sources and was supplemented by interviews and quite often by hypothesis-testing quantitative analyses. There was recourse to history primarily in identifying the institutional logics that were at play. Thirdly, the central premise in all of these studies was that a single dominant logic prevailed in particular historical periods, transformation involving the replacement of one institutional logic by another. This perspective did culminate in viewing "historical contingency" as a "meta-theoretical" principle in later, more extensive formulations of the institutional logic approach.[43] Although this meant an appreciation of the historically contingent nature of

institutional logics, history essentially came to be treated as a 'moderator' or a 'scope condition or forcing variable'.[44]

By the end of the 2000s the institutional logics literature took a turn towards reviving Friedland and Alford's observation that societal institutions are 'potentially contradictory and hence make multiple logics available to individuals and organizations'.[45] Transported to the field level, this idea led to an interest in studying institutional pluralism within fields and the institutional complexity that may thus be engendered for organizations. With this shift in attention, greater primacy was given to examining contemporaneous influences of multiple logics, though some studies did acknowledge that the nature of these pressures and organizational responses may be dependent on history.[46] A notable study addressing the question of multiple logics by taking a historical perspective has been Dunn and Jones' work on medical education in the US. These authors have delineated and traced the development of as well as the tensions between "care" and "science" logics over the period 1910-2005, showing also that the salience of the two logics have varied over time.[47] Nevertheless, as Micoletta et al. have observed, there is still a lot to learn about the effects of institutional pluralism and complexity on institutional change.[48] Although these authors have called for more quantitative studies, this is yet another opportunity for bringing in historical research.

Another promising avenue has been recently proposed by Ocasio and his colleagues. Returning again to Friedland and Alford, they observe that little has been done on how societal institutions emerge and change over time. Ocasio et al. suggest that "collective memory" serves to constitute and shape the evolution of societal logics, which in turn 'provide a historical lens through which memory and history are recursively shaped, reproduced and reconstructed'. [49] Societal logics therefore need to be viewed not as 'transhistorical' but with respect to their

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historical specificity. This perspective does open new pathways for historical analyses of the constitution and evolution of societal institutions as well as field-level logics embedded in them.

Future directions for historical research on institutional change

The contributions to this special issue take different approaches to combining institutional theory with historical research. Each engages with the tension between change as a large-scale shift of institutional logics and the more individual practices and actions that facilitate these shifts in different and unique ways. Daniel R Wadhwani focuses on historical institutionalism and its contribution to understanding the co-evolution of organizational fields by providing a more contextual understanding of institutional and historical processes. Historical institutionalism differs from institutional theory in that rather than assuming that institutions are stable and rule-like, it instead conceptualizes them as historically contextualized. Wadhwani elaborates how this framework could support historical research by analysing the co-evolution of legal and organizational change in US savings bank regulation, developing an alternative way of conceptualization major institutional change.

Pamela Popielarz returns to some of the key concerns raised by Alfred Kieser's work on the evolutionary impact of guilds and other pre-modern and early modern organizations.[50] She investigates the role of a seemingly social organization – the Freemasons – in normalizing the role of business in society in early nineteenth century US. Through a detailed analysis of historical records she argues that moral improvement organizations such as the Freemasons explored the opportunities for profit that emerging finance capitalism afforded and in return provided legitimacy for these practices, while also transferring the enduring imagery of the white male

businessman as an upstanding member of the community. By narrowing in on practices and taken for granted assumptions, she illustrates how associations become agents of change.

Neil Thompson provides an interesting case for applying institutional work to business history by looking at the evolution of record pools in the US. These organizations emerged in the 1970s to enable disco DJs to access new music, and subsequently became important in popularizing new music. At every step, individual agency shaped the form of these pools, and this became particularly important with the advent of digital music. In his analysis, the role of boundary organizations – which have multiple connections with different groups – stand out as important agents of change.

In his analysis of Finnish hypermarkets, Jarmo Sepällä focuses on company magazines' practices of symbolic legitimization of organizational change. Legitimacy theory overlaps with institutional theory in many ways and offers an important theoretical tool to understand institutional change and organizational survival. Yet research on legitimization processes often lacks a sophisticated grasp of contextual factors and complex causality that business historical research can offer.

Aya Chacar asks whether formal or informal institutions change first, and whether context matters. In an in-depth study of rule change in US baseball she juxtaposes two case studies to address these questions. While she cautions that informal institutions can be, by their nature, more difficult to detect, in historical research these can often be identified through an accumulation of events that ultimately drive change.

Olivier Butzbach shifts the focus from theory towards methods and sources, and argues for a plurality of methods, even within individual studies. In his analysis of building societies in the

UK he employs evolutionary theory and institutional logics in conjunction with methodological concerns about the status of the archive drawn from Foucault's work and recent development in organizational history scholarship. He seeks to address the different interdisciplinary issues about the relationship between generalizability to theory given the frequent particularistic claims of historical analysis.

As a set, these contributions offer a number of avenues for business historians to explore the opportunities presented by engaging with the many and diverse facets of institutional theory. As management and organization scholars are becoming more interested in historical approaches, business historians should conversely avail themselves of the theoretical insights that can extend our historiographical understanding of the past.

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