

**HISTORY CONTRA MEMORY: RESPONSE TO WANG, STEELE AND
GREENWOOD.**

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Milo Shaoqing Wang, Christopher Steele and Royston Greenwood pose an interesting challenge to my interpretation of institutional logics. They suggest that rather than, in their words, starting with a list and ‘looking for manifestations’, we ought to look at historical specificities, examining how logics emerge from combinations of events and mentalitiés. Such emergence requires taking a ‘bottom up’ approach to history, examining, in particular, processes of collective memory making. While I agree that one task of the historian is to explore such processes, there is a danger in reducing the tasks of history to just that. Rather, historians have sought to test the memories that actors construct against the evidence that the historical record provides, as I explore in a little more detail below. However, before doing that I wish to address a couple of points that perhaps were not clear in my original formulations.

To begin with, I am not convinced that I advocated starting with a list of logics and then looking for manifestations. The task of historical investigation is rather more complex than that. It tends to involve a dialogue between the evidence that is found and interpreted from the sources that survive and more abstract concepts. I am happy to agree that concrete analysis needs to place these more abstract concepts in particular contexts of time and place. In carrying out such investigations, it is clear that new logics can emerge from the activities that persons engage in. Such, indeed, was Weber’s account of the emergence of knowledge as a distinct sphere of value from the institutional order that was religion (Weber, 1948: 351). However, it was an emergence that continued to be coloured by the nature of that emergence, something which historians of particular organizations for the production and transmission of knowledge, such as universities, acknowledge (Clark, 2006). In addition, I agree with the

authors that ‘some logics – however common elsewhere – may be absent’. If I gave the impression that all the logics that I outlined are ‘inevitably manifested in different historical contexts’ then that is the fault of my efforts at explanation. Moreover, I am not trying to posit some sense of invariable ‘needs’. I recognise that the character of such ‘needs’ or ‘wants’ are themselves historically shaped, conditioned by the changing balance and manifestations of differing logics.

What Wang, Steele and Greenwood are pointing to, I think, is the enduring conundrum at the heart of historical sociology. For the historian, the abstract schemes of the sociologist fail to pay attention to the contingency of situated action; for the sociologist, the historian’s focus on detail tends to obscure patterns that underlie such actions. It is in order to address such tensions that the social theorist Margaret Archer posits the need to develop what she terms ‘analytical histories of emergence’:

analytical narratives of emergence can never ever be *grand* precisely because the imperative to narrate derives from recognizing the intervention of contingency and the need to examine its effects on the exercise or suspension of the generative powers in question — since outcomes will vary accordingly but unpredictably. On the other hand, *analytical narratives* are obviously distinct from any version of historical narration tout court, for although social realists in general have no difficulty in accepting the strong likelihood of uniqueness at the level of events, the endorsement of real but unobservable generative mechanisms directs analysis towards the interplay between the real, the actual and the empirical to explain precise outcomes (Archer, 1995: 343).

That is, the suspicion is that ‘grand’ theories of social action (such as Marxism) invite the tendency to simply ‘read off’ human action from the specification of the founding conditions

that the theory predicts. Examining specific historical episodes indicates the impacts that occur in specific events. However, the task of historical sociology is not just to rest with such events; rather, it is to use analytical frameworks to seek to explain outcomes. I have suggested that using institutional logics as such a framework helps to explain the patterned outcomes that we observe and, in particular, gives us a way of attending to comparative analysis.

I am not convinced that the focus that the authors suggest on events and mentalités resolves this tension so much as it expresses it. That is, the discussion of the nature of events in historical sociology has often focused on the large-scale happenings that appear to mark significant and irreversible changes of direction. Notable in this category is the study of revolutions, especially those in France and Russia. However, historians such as William Sewell who have sought to examine the conceptualization of events give us a note of caution here. He observes that ruptures from expected courses of action occur frequently (every day, he suggests) ‘as a consequence of exogenous causes, of contradictions between structures, of sheer human inventiveness or perversity, or of simple mistakes in enacting routines. But most ruptures are neutralized and reabsorbed into the preexisting structures in one way or another - they may, for example, be forcefully repressed, pointedly ignored, or explained away as exceptions’ (Sewell, 2005: 227). Events might provide us with a useful lens for examining the nature of the logics at play and their shifting balance, but they need to be placed in a broader context. Historians often stress the extended nature of change, one involving multiple actors and events over an extended period. It makes sense, argues the political scientist Paul Pierson (2004), to talk not of institutional change but of institutional development. Too much of a focus on the event, that is, runs the danger, as I have argued elsewhere, of smuggling the rational actor back in to institutional theory (Mutch, 2007). Their nature and outcomes, that is, are conditioned by wider structures, amongst which might be the mentalités that shape

them. And here is where the tension is unresolved, for such mentalités are, in the works of the Annales school, enduring.

Perhaps my focus on the enduring nature of such mentalités has been colored by my own work on religion. I have, for example, in part inspired by the focus on institutional theory on taken for granted practices, examined the archival sources for traces of the governance practices at work in the eighteenth century Churches of Scotland and England. Understanding the distinctive contrasts found in this detailed study of governance practices in the two countries required placing them in the broader institutional context that both conditioned them and that they reproduced. Examining this context for Scotland in particular stressed an inter-related set of religious, legal and educational systems (Mutch 2015). Emergent from their mutually reinforcing features was a distinctive set of ideas – a mentalité, if you wish – that featured an obsession with order, a predilection for written rules of procedure and an emphasis on the written word. Such a mentalité lay behind Scottish pre-eminence in accounting and accountability from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, with influences on other areas of the world (Mutch, 2016). It also, I have sought to argue, had enduring consequences that linger to this day (as discussed, for example, in Craig (2011)). Yet, when I turned to the leading work on institutional logics (Thornton, Occasio and Lounsbury, 2012), I found that neither the law nor education featured. It was to explain these absences that I sought to abstract from the historical record, informed, as Wang, Steele and Greenwood say, by historians like Huizinga and Friedson, but also by the work of Max Weber on value spheres, in order to develop concepts that would be abstract enough to form the basis for contextualised work located in particular aspects of time and space.

A further challenge is posed by the emphasis of the authors on the importance of collective memory in the generation of and adherence to logics. The importance of emotional, embodied responses to institutional logics is beginning to be addressed (Voronov and Vince,

2012; Weick, 2018) and has in it echoes of the focus of students of the nation state on the emotional, as opposed to cognitive, attachment to nationalism. As Benedict Anderson (1991) famously argued, such attachments involve the construction of imaginary collectivities, bound together by attachment to symbols. As Michael Billig has emphasised in his study of ‘banal nationalism’, the important symbol ‘is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’ (Billig, 1995: 8). Thus it is certainly important to examine how collective memories shape the nature and take up of such symbols. However, historians have also long challenged the basis of such collective memories, especially in the examination of the invention of tradition. Historians have often been able to show that many ‘traditions’ which claim enduring status are in fact rather recent inventions (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Memory can thus be faulty. One interesting illustration of this point is supplied by the legal scholar James Whitman in his discussion of German dignitary law. Such law, which seeks to afford legal protection to human dignity, is often located by German jurists in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, argues Whitman, the

ideas of ‘respect’ and ‘personal honour’ that inform the current law and culture of insult are, in turn, deeply rooted in German society and in German social history. In particular, the law of insult, as it exists today, has aristocratic sources. Germans involved in insult litigation display a kind of touchy sense of their own ‘honour’ that is very much reminiscent of the old aristocratic duellists’ world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Whitman, 2013: 332).

From historical work he concludes ‘Interviewing local informants is a very poor way of fully understanding what is going on in European dignitary law. The participants themselves do not understand where their system came from, nor why it takes the form it takes’ (Whitman,

2013: 334). While it is important for historians to take account of such faulty memories, their task should not be conflated with them.

While work which explores the configurations of substance and practices at any particular point in time and space is both valuable and necessary, the dangers of inductively building out from such instances is mirrored in the work on institutional logics that draws only on the instances that have been examined in the organizational literature (Thornton, Occasio and Lounsbury, 2012). This runs the risk of ignoring large areas of social life and of failing to meet the mission of the original authors to ‘bring society back in’ (Friedland and Alford, 1991). While I accept that my criteria for positing that spheres such as play, education, the law and the military are fundamental to the human construction of social structure are always open to debate and questioning, the enterprise of seeking to construct abstract analytical categories out of the record of human activity is, I contend, a valuable one.

The philosopher Julian Baggini (2018) has pointed out the dangers of ‘pseudo-universalism’, where phenomena that pertain to a particular time and place are illicitly generalized to cover all of humanity. As he observes ‘the aspiration for the universal becomes a crude insistence on the uniform. Sensitivity is lost to the very different needs of different cultures at different times and places’ (Baggini, 2018). It is a danger that is particularly associated with ‘Western’ schools of philosophy (and, one might argue, some branches of organizational analysis). But he also recognizes that ‘mistrust of the universalist aspiration, however, can go too far’ (Baggini, 2018). That is, our conceptualizations have to strike a balance between abstract formulations that derive from common dilemmas facing humankind and the particular ways in which such dilemmas are addressed. We need, that is, both the focus on the local and particular that Wang, Steele and Greenwood argue for and the construction of analytical frameworks that transcend such particularities.

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