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Cultural Traces and Traces of Culture: Problems of Studying Corporate Culture over Time

The primary purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the problems of developing a company history. Through analysis of British Airways' histories, an organizational culture focus is used to tease out some of the problems of tracing organizational influences over time.

Introduction

Recent debate suggests that a focus on organizational culture can aid our understanding of a company's history. It has been argued, for example, that through analysis of the culture of an organization the business historian can gain an understanding of how that company developed over time (Dellheim, 1986). Rowlinson & Procter (1999: 369-70) contend that the utilization of an organizational culture perspective can provide "theoretical relevance for business history" but conclude that this potential "has not been fulfilled" due, in large part, to the "conventions that divide business history from organizational culture studies". What is missing from the debate is discussion of the problems involved in theorizing and applying a cultural approach.

This paper reports on the problem of studying organizational culture over time, and reflects on the lessons for business historians. Analysis of ten selected histories and corporate documents of British Airways provide a case study that illustrates some of the problems of historic re/construction: of the histories one - a study of the business success of British Airways (BA) - includes a brief history of the company (Corke, 1986), two deal directly with BA (Penrose, 1980; Reed, 1990a) and a further four discuss company predecessors, including British European Airways (BEA) (Bao, 1989), British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) (Pudney, 1959), Imperial Airways (Jackson, 1995), and Railway Air Service (RAS) (Stroud, 1987); the final three works are histories of aviation that include extensive referencing to BA (Hudson, 1972; Hudson & Pettifer, 1979; Sampson, 1984).

In concert with Rowlinson & Procter (1999), this paper starts from the premise that the study of organizational culture over time can lend an important theoretical dimension to business history; that awareness of the different conventions of 'doing history' and 'analyzing organizational phenomena' needs to be brought to the fore; and that there is a need to move away from founder-centered narratives in business history.

Drawing on the work of Jenkins (1994) and Weick (1995), it is argued that a history of British Airways (as with most other long-term organizations) amounts to the construction of a plausible story that depends on extracted cues that include, legal status, acquisitions and mergers, organizational size, socio-political status, organizational memory and a coherence of key personnel across time. The paper goes on to show how the use of different cues lead to differing versions of company history that rely for their plausibility on a number of underlying assumptions. It is argued that corporate histories are retrospective accounts of events, designed to enact the current purposes of corporate managers and/or of historians (Douglas, 1986), and are strongly influenced by on-going social discourses (e.g., the 'nature of business') and conventions (e.g., business history vs. organizational analysis).

Organizational Culture as an Heuristic for the Study of Corporate Practices

For some time management theorists have argued that an organizational culture perspective provides a holistic approach to the study of organizational problems and outcomes (cf. Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983). It is argued that through analysis of the various symbols, artifacts, myths, and beliefs that constitute a particular way of 'doing things', the organizational scientist can shed light on such things as the motivation, connectedness, and sense of corporate identity of organizational members that is thought to be at the root of corporate growth and success. Weighing into the debate, some business historians argue that an organizational culture perspective is useful in providing a theoretical framework for making sense of the factors that contribute to a company's success over time (Rowlinson & Procter, 1999). Dellheim (1986: 11-12) agrees but adds that business history has much to offer a cultural perspective in return, arguing that, as opposed to contemporary studies of organizational culture, the historical approach "can illuminate how corporate cultures are created and how they change, or fail to change, despite or because of internal and external conditions". Indeed, within organizational analysis, Pettigrew (1979) contends that a focus on culture over time is a better way to understand patterns of change than getting a snapshot at one point in time.

Despite the fact that some business historians have utilized an organizational culture framework (cf. Church, 1996; Dellheim, 1986), Rowlinson & Procter (1996: 369) contend that this is not the case with the majority of business historians, whose adoption of "an objective stance . . . allows them to write definitive company histories, but makes it difficult to engage with the subjectivism and relativism of organizational symbolism . . .". But this only deals with the tip of the iceberg. It is not merely a difference in research convention (between business historians and organizational symbolists) but in paradigmatic thinking that divides scholars *within*, as well as across, disciplines (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The adoption of a culture approach over time is also problematic in its application.

Theorizing Organizational Culture

Two methodological preconditions influence the application of a culture approach. The first depends on the historiography, and the second on the cultural framework adopted. Arguably, the methodological approach to a particular History shapes not only the cues that the historian seeks out but the way those cues are drawn together in a rendering of actors and events. This is, of course, not a new idea. Lukacs (1997: 6), for example, argues that there is no definitive historical method but what the historian must be good at is in knowing "how to read". Lukacs goes on to analyse the various ways that the historian's own values and perspectives influence such a reading. Jenkins (1994:12) takes this further in his contention that historiography is a "manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator' ". For Jenkins (1994: 5) history "is one of a series of discourses about the world . . . [that] do not create the world but they do appropriate it and give it all the meanings it has". Reed (1990a), for example, is primarily interested in the development and growth of BA and his history contributes to a discourse of organizational success. Mills' (1998) history of BA, on the other hand, contributes to a discourse on employment equity through its focus on the influence of organizational practices on gender.

Clearly, the theoretical choice of an organizational culture framework will be strongly influenced by the adopted historiography and focus of interest (e.g., organizational growth vs. gendered practices). For example, it is not surprising that Dellheim (1986), with his functionalist approach to a business history focussed on organizational success, should be sympathetic to the work of Schein (1985), or that

Mills (1998), with his “managerial realist” approach¹² focussed on the development of gendered realities over time, should be drawn to Smircich’s (1983) notion of culture as a ‘root metaphor’ for making sense of organizational realities. In this paper, organizational culture is viewed as a useful metaphor for attempting to capture a configuration of factors that influence lived experiences.

In applying the culture metaphor to the study of organizational realities some scholars tend towards analysis based on a reading of contemporary events (e.g., Schein, 1995) while others argue for analysis of the long-term (e.g., Pettigrew, 1979). This paper takes the latter view and argues that organizational culture should be understood as dynamic, developing and changing over time. As such cultures should be studied over time and in social context (e.g. Dellheim, 1986; Kieser, 1989). As Reed (1990b) has observed, metaphors are problematic if they are incapable of providing insights into the historical development of specific organizations.

Applying an Organizational Culture Framework

Definitional problems are only the beginning. The application of a culture framework confronts the business historian with a series of problems, including research methods, epistemological issues, organizational access, and the sifting of extracted cues into a plausible account. Due to constraints of space, this paper focusses on the latter but will briefly address the other problem areas.

Methods. In contrast to organizational culture research, which tends to focus on the ‘uncovering of meaning’ by way of interviews and observation, the business historian typically relies on archival research. Arguably, the former misses the ‘historical’ dimension while the latter misses the symbolic nuances of an organizational culture (Rowlinson & Procter, 1999). In this paper corporate documents and histories are ‘read’ for the insights they provide on the cultural values of British Airways as well as on the thinking of those who authored them, i.e., histories and archival materials are analyzed using an organizational symbolism framework (Weick, 1995).

Epistemological issues. Orientation to ‘time’ and ‘progress’, key epistemological issues within business history, have been the recent subject of debate within organizational studies in particular (Hofstede, 1980) and the social sciences and humanities in general (Foucault, 1980). This paper departs from the view, prevalent within business history, of time as continuous and progressive. As has been argued elsewhere (Helms Hatfield & Mills, 2000), the culture of an organization is viewed as being composed of different rule configurations at any given point and, thus, time should not be studied as a continuous process but as a series of junctures, or “concurrency of events which create a moment in time - a series of images, impressions and experiences which act to give the appearance of a coherent whole and which influence how [an] organization is understood”. In other words, the history of a given organization should not be seen as a series of progressively changing events but as a series of key time frames that shape how things were viewed at a given period of time.

Organizational access. Access to an organization can be problematic not only for the collection but the interpretation of data. Rowlinson & Procter (1999: 382-3) contend that the ‘only way’ business historians can get access to company records is ‘to be commissioned to write company histories’, as a result, ‘however scholarly, accurate, fair, objective and serious that company history is, its content is

¹² . This is a term developed by Reed (1992: 183) to describe an approach that is “theoretically grounded in a model of the organization as an interrelated network of social practices through which a wide multiplicity of activities are assembled to form institutionalized frameworks or patterns of collective action sustained over time and place by a matrix of rules.”

necessarily shaped by the need for the author to give his client something approaching what he wants¹³. For example, it could be argued that Pudney's (1959) characterization of BOAC as a progressive company was influenced by the fact that the history was undertaken at the invitation of the company 'chairman', Sir Gerard d'Erlanger. In a contrary vein, Schein (1985) argues that, in contrast to "ethnographic" study, this "clinical" approach to the study of organizational culture is more likely to achieve results. Two points can be made here. First, access need not depend on corporate expectations. The archival study of BA, reported in this paper, was undertaken without any formal or informal understandings between the researcher and the company. Second, if it is agreed that all research is rooted in paradigmatic views then it is difficult to claim that one area of research better than another is because it is free of conventions or expectations.

Extracted Cues and Plausible Accounts

With one notable exception, most histories of BA trace the airline's roots back to 1919. This is not as straightforward as it may first appear. The image of a single company operating uninterrupted for a period of eighty years is only achieved by a focus on one or a combination of enacted cues that, in turn, depend on the purpose of the researcher.

The particular interests and purpose of the historian shape the way that s/he constructs a history, in particular providing the "enacted cues" that lead to a certain "discovery" (Weick, 1995). BA histories rely on a combination of enacted cues that include legal status, acquisitions and mergers, organizational size, socio-political status, organizational memory and a coherence of key personnel across time. These general cues are linked to on-going debates concerning property rights, efficiency, and the political economy of organizational success.

The company as a legal entity. Corporate law, by delineating the legal realm of a particular company, provides the business historian with a ready made set of boundaries within which to focus attention. Nonetheless, legal status can be problematic, particularly in regard to the study of organizational culture over time. For example, BA came into being in 1974 through an amalgamation of BEA and BOAC. Between 1988 and 1994 the company acquired British Asia Airways, Brymon Airways, Caledonian Airways and Dan Air. Thus, while we can broadly identify BA as a legal entity over a period of twenty years (1974-94), in terms of cultural experiences the BA of 1988-94 is very different from that of the period 1974-87. This is not simply an issue of cultural change over time but of dramatic shifts in personnel and some fragmentation of the experiences of the workplace as a whole.

The problem continues the further one goes back in time. In strictly legal terms, British Airways has only existed since 1974. To trace the culture prior to 1974 one has a choice of following developments in BEA or in BOAC and then tracing the chosen root 'forward' in time, i.e., tracing BA practices that have a coherent link to either the old BEA or BOAC. In claiming that BA has a history prior to 1974 airline historians have been forced to broaden their enacted cues to include a focus on mergers and acquisitions, but with varying results.

The company as a series of acquisitions and mergers over time. The tracing of a company's lineage through a series of merged and acquired companies presents a different set of problems for the historian. This can be illustrated by way of a 1994 BA chart celebrating "75 Years" in business, which claims some fifty-three predecessor companies. This is interesting in indicating the legal background of the company but it is far from clear, which of the fifty-three companies had a greater influence on the development of British Airways. For the scholar who is interested in tracing the impact of organizational

¹³ . We may note here the gendered use of 'he' to characterise both historian and client.

dynamics in a single company over time certain questions remain. What, for example, can be said to link developments in one company with developments in another? To what extent is it possible to speak of events in one company, in one period of time, as if they are relevant to another company at a different point in time? We are still left with the central questions of how did the practices in any one company come to influence the practices in BA, and which companies were more influential in the process?

Histories of BA vary in the emphasis given to predecessor companies. This is in large part due to the primary purpose and focus of the history. We would, for instance, expect to find a more detailed account of a number of predecessors in the overall histories of Reed (1990) and Penrose (1980), but a more cursory history in Corke's (1986) analysis of BA's profitability strategy. Similarly we would expect to find that earlier histories (Pudney, 1959), histories of earlier periods (Jackson, 1995), or histories of specific predecessors (Stroud, 1987; Bao, 1989), while excluding discussion of more recent events, would provide a more detailed company history than would general accounts of commercial aviation (Hudson, 1974; Hudson & Pettifer, 1979; Sampson, 1984). Nonetheless, purpose and focus alone do not account for all the differences. Bao's (1989) genealogy of BEA, for example, traces the company history back through Allied Airways, Channel Islands Airways, and a number of other small airlines: most other accounts trace the company back through BOAC, British Airways Ltd. (BA Ltd.), Imperial Airways, and Aircraft Transport & Travel Ltd. (AT&T).

Organizational size, social-political status, and company history. On its own the documenting of mergers and acquisitions does not provide essential clues to the dominance of some organizational dynamics over others in the development of BA. Here the historical accounts are interesting in the way they sift through various enacted cues to impose their own sense of order on events. Examining the way that historians select a few of the fifty-three predecessors around which to build a plausible story we cannot fail to be struck by the notion of history as socially constructed, as a discourse that bestows meaning on a situation (Jenkins, 1994).

Of all BA's predecessors¹⁴ only twelve are referenced in fifty percent or more of the selected BA histories. The remaining thirty-six airlines are more or less excluded through a focus on organizational size (e.g., number of employees, volume of sales, size of operating budget, etc.), socio-political status (i.e., state vs. private ownership, national vs. regional service, domestic vs. international service, owning v subsidiary organization), or historical significance¹⁵. Predecessors are more likely to be referenced where they are large relative to other airlines, government-owned or subsidized, international carriers, and/or are viewed as 'founding' or 'foundation' airlines. All twelve of the more referenced airlines meet the first three criteria, and there is general agreement that, of these, Imperial, BOAC and BEA are foundation companies (i.e., key aspects of BA's lineage). There is less agreement about the relative importance of the other nine companies. The least controversial is the treatment of, British Marine Air Navigation Co. Ltd. (BMAN), Handley Page Transport Ltd. (HPT), the Instone Airline Ltd. (Instone), British South American Airways (BSAA) and Spartan Air Lines Ltd. (Spartan). The first three are identified as founding companies that, along with AT&T and the Daimler Airway (Daimler), went on to form Imperial Airways in 1924: BMAN is the more neglected of the three, receiving little more than mention of its routes and involvement in the Imperial merger. BSAA and Spartan receive limited discussion as companies that, through merger, contributed to the development of one of the principle airlines -- BOAC.

¹⁴ That is, excluding five companies that were acquired after the latest historical account (by Reed, 1990) was written.

¹⁵ . Fourteen are not referenced by any of the selected histories, and the remainder are referenced in far less than half of them.

More controversial is the discussion of AT&T, Daimler, RAS, and BA Ltd. In most narratives AT&T receives more attention than the other founding companies and in one case it is viewed as *the* direct predecessor of Imperial (Reed, 1990). Founded, along with HPT and Instone, in 1919 AT&T has the distinction of becoming the world's first airline to begin a scheduled international air-service, on August 25 of that year. That historic flight is often a starting point for histories of BA yet there is some disagreement about its relationship to the founding of Imperial Airways. While some accounts portray AT&T as the predecessor of the Daimler Airway (e.g., Corke, 1986) evidence suggests otherwise. To begin with, AT&T changed ownership in 1920, being sold to the Birmingham Small Arms (BSA)-Daimler group in 1920 (Pudney, 1959; Penrose, 1980; Sampson, 1984). Second, operating under the AT&T name, the company was placed under new management, with Colonel Frank Searle, the founder of Daimler Hire Ltd., as Managing Director. Third, the new AT&T was declared bankrupt and liquidated at the end of 1920. Fourth, none of the airline's assets were taken over by the Daimler Airway, which was founded in 1921 (Pudney, 1959: 61). Fifth, the Daimler Airway was established by financial backers (the BSA group) and entrepreneur-managers (Searle and Major Woods Humphery, the former General Manager of HPT) who were not involved in the original AT&T (Jackson, 1995).

Discussion of RAS and BA Ltd. are problematic in a different way. Despite some agreement on the respective socio-political status and operational prominence of both companies they are more often discussed in the secondary role of merged rather than principle companies. In spite of the fact that RAS had important links to Imperial Airways, that the company played an important role in the founding of BEA, and that its first "chairman", Sir Harold Hartley, went on to chair the Boards of BEA (1946) and BOAC (1947-9), only Stroud (1984) and Bao (1989) highlight its contribution to the development of BA. Likewise, despite the relative prominence of BA Ltd. and the fact that three of its directors went on to play key roles in BOAC only Pudney (1959) discusses the company in its own right.

It is clear from this debate that reference to 'British Airways' has several different meanings, and that those differences have implications for the study of organizational culture. Primarily there is a need to establish a clear pattern of interactions that runs through a series of organizational experiences over time. For example, starting with Imperial Airways one could identify a key practice (e.g., piloting) and trace it back through the 'foundation' airlines, focussing on areas where there is a direct link between past and current practice. That practice could then be traced forward by following the pathways that arise out of the Imperial practice, ignoring elements that have their roots in other experiences (e.g., practices in BA Ltd.).

Organizational memory (and personnel coherence) In the construction of corporate histories accounts inevitably draw upon 'memories' or 'traces' from a variety of sources, including corporate documents and films¹⁶, artifacts, and 'informants'. Here we run into the problem of voice. Many selected histories establish a sense of coherent organization across time through reference to founders, senior managers and other 'leading personalities', often culled from materials that are on the whole developed by those in privileged positions (e.g., managers, editors, corporate accountants, marketing personnel, film producers) for specific ends. Ignored in the process are a variety of other actors who may have played important roles in the development of the organization's cultural life. To some extent these other voices may be accessed through interviews and observations but this is far from easy where the company has a long history and many of its early members are deceased. Other potential sources include letters and company newsletters, although filtered through editorial control, provide some insights into a broader level of thinking within the company.

In analyzing corporate materials we need to be mindful, in the words of Douglas (1986: 69-70) that, "Institutions create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked. They

¹⁶. Imperial Airways, BOAC, BEA and British Airways all made films designed to build corporate image.

make other areas show finely discriminated detail, which is closely scrutinized and ordered. History emerges in an unintended shape as a result of practices directed to immediate, practical ends.” Nonetheless, it can be argued that, “to watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kind of events and obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds” (Douglas, 1986: 70). That is true to a certain extent. Corporate images are often powerful in their impact and may not only reflect but create an organization’s discourse. To that end, the study of corporate culture can draw on corporate materials to reveal a powerful element of the imaging process to which people were exposed over time. Indeed, as Scott (1987: 29) puts it, while we “cannot simply accept at face value the written records or people’s memories; we cannot assume that [men and] women’s experience lies outside officially constructed contexts, as a definably separate, “purer” commentary on politics. Instead we must read the evidence we accumulate for what it reveals about how people appropriate and use political discourse, how they are shaped by it and in turn redefine its meaning.

Reviewing archival sources from Imperial, BOAC, BEA, and British Airways it is clear that not only are some persons given prominence over others but that some airlines are more central to the ‘collective memory’ than others. By and large, AT&T, Daimler, Instone, HPT BMAN, Imperial, BOAC and BEA take center stage in corporate recollections and histories. Little or no references are made to RAS and BA Ltd. With the passing of time it is not surprising to find that internal ‘recollections’ have become to focus almost exclusively on the narrow lineage of BOAC, BEA, and Imperial Airways with decreasing references to the founding airlines.

Organizational Construction and Gendered Accounts

Within the framing of organizational boundaries it is not only members of the smaller airlines who take a back seat or are ignored entirely. By and large the narratives of British Airways focus on the achievements of men rather than women (Mills, 1995; 1997a;1997b;1998). It may be argued that this is to be expected in an industry that has ‘traditionally’ been dominated by men. It was men who founded the various airline companies and managed the processes of merger and acquisition. It was a number of different men who steered the organization to levels of efficiency and economic success. And it was a series of male pilots who contributed to the overall character of the company. Two points can be made. First, to understand the development of an organizational culture we need to know something about the gendered character of the actors involved. To ignore the maleness of the actors involved may be to miss an important aspect of organizational behaviour (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). For example, military forms of masculinity contributed to the development of an esprit de corps in the early years of BA (Mills, 1995) yet proved a hindrance to service provision in the 1980s (Hampden-Turner, 1990). Second, by ignoring the role of gender a ‘naturalizing’ of masculinity is achieved through a process of historical reconstruction, i.e., ‘history’ suggests that the absence of women is ‘normal’.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper agrees with the view that an organizational culture framework can be of value to business history in identifying factors that contribute to various company outcomes, and that the dynamics of organizational culture are best studied over time. To that end, some of the problems of theorizing and applying a culture framework are explored through a theoretical approach based on Jenkins’s (1994) historiography, Weick’s (1995) organizational sensemaking, and Hatfield & Mills’ (2000) rules theory of organizational culture.

Jenkins’ (1994) notion of history as discourse and historiography as rooted in the perspective of the historian draws attention to the underlying influences on the development of a work of History. In particular it helps to demystify some of the objectification of business history that, in the process, may be

blind to the changing dynamics that contribute to a company's development over time. But it also alerts the historian to some of the problems involved in developing a research strategy involving the use of an organizational culture framework. Arguably, through an organizational culture framework the business historian is better placed to identify those factors which influence shifting patterns of behaviour, but only where s/he is open to other research conventions and methods of analysis (Rowlinson & Procter, 1999). Identifying and making clear, rather than ignoring or attempting to isolate, the subjective influences on a particular project can help the business historian to develop a coherent research strategy. Understanding History as discourse not only helps the researcher to resist some objectification of events but allows her/him to interrogate existing histories.

If it is accepted that History is a form of sensemaking then Weick's (1995) theory of organizational sensemaking can provide an invaluable framework. For instance, several of Weick's (1995) key "properties of sensemaking" – including 'identity construction', 'extracted cues', 'plausibility', 'retrospective' and 'ongoing sensemaking' – draw attention to different aspects of the process of historiography.

Identity construction, or the notion that sensemaking is influenced by the identity needs of the sensemaker, accords with Jenkins' (1994) view of the relationship of historian to historiography. This alerts us to the fact that the study of history is very much rooted in the present and that we need to take care when we 'read' the past in terms of the discourses of today. This involves the business historian in a careful balance of the needs of the present (e.g., a focus on the present day financial or employment equity 'successes' of BA) with an understanding of the meanings that actors attributed to events in the past. For example, by today's standards the racism that was endemic in BA in the 1930s (Mills, 1995) cannot be excused but it cannot be explained unless the historian attempts to understand the mind-set of the era.

Extracted cues, or the selection of salient factors from a multitude of events and ideas, remind us that history is always a selective reading of the past. This paper has attempted to indicate how extracted cues (i) are embedded in the purposes of the historian, "on-going" discourses of organizational sensemaking, and the nature of corporate materials; (ii) are problematic in the construction of a plausible account of BA's culture over time; and (iii) lead to different histories. This suggests that the business historian needs to be aware of those factors that influence the choice of cues and be open to alternative readings and voices. For example, an attempt to understand the culture of BA raises very different questions about the boundaries of a particular company and who may have played a role in its development, thus providing new insights into current practices and developments. Thus, while reading corporate documents as authentic aspects of a company discourse at a point of time the business historian needs to find ways of revealing other voices in the process. Arguably, a plausible accounting of company history can gain much from analysis of the role of masculinity and femininity in the process. Finally, the paper contends that History needs to be read as a series of junctures in time rather than a progressive unfolding of events; placing greater emphasis on the role of action.

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