The road to hidden history, learning from the living past.

Increasingly modern organizations tend to acknowledge that organizational learning somehow involves past experience. Managers realize that they have to reflect on the past before planning for the future (Kieser 1998, Craig 2002, Booth 2003), employees are invited to participate in this reflection (Senge 1990, Dixon 1998) and the first 'learning historians' have made their way to organizations (Kleiner and Roth 1999, 2000). More and more, learning organizations seem to become historical organizations.

But in spite of this consensus on the importance of the historical approach, opinions differ on *how* and *what* we can learn from past experience. Concerning *method*, three main directions can be discerned. Recently, narrative and story telling (Allan 2002, Du Toit 2003, Gabriel 2004) have won some terrain at the cost of some 'older' forms as discussion, debate and dialogue (Bohm 2000, Isaacs 1999, Flick 1998, Kessels, 1999), which once supplanted traditional, positivist ways of dealing with the past (scientific and management, strategy thinking, Deming etc.).

Opinions concerning the *subject matter* of the historical approach differ even more. To the question, What are we to learn from past experience? answers vary from 'making sense of past events', 'understanding who we are', 'getting the right picture', 'the leading story' and 'deconstruction' on the one hand (Chia 1996, Burrell 1997, Czarniawska 1997, Du Toit 2003), to understanding 'scripts' and 'patterns' to causal connections, a platform for planning, and 'a history of the future' on the other (Gilmore 1997, Flood 1999, Hannabus 2000). In itself, this variety shows clearly that there is no consensus on what can be learned from history. More importantly, there is no clear idea of what history has to offer organizations in contrast to all other disciplines.

In this paper I will try to throw some light on this problem. I will first show how the various historical approaches to organizational learning reflect different answers to the question 'what is history'? It is this question that has dominated recent philosophy of history. Here too three positions can be discerned. Narrativist (White 1973, Ankersmit 2001) hold history is representation, like novels or paintings, whereas positivists from Hempel and Popper to Braudel and nowadays Elster (1983) and Lorenz (2002, 2005) hold that history is some kind of (social) science. However, a third group, among them Croce, Collingwood, Gallie, Mink and Stanford holds that history is a science *sui generis*. The corrolary of the latter position, which I will defend, is that history can teach something unique to organizations, something that narratives or social research cannot give. But what is this?

In order to answer this question, we have to plunge down to the ontological level. Here I will show that both the positivist and the narrativist approach presuppose that the past is dead, whereas the truly historical approach starts from the notion of the living past (Collingwood 1939, Whitehead 1929). From this it follows that the true historian is not a story teller, or a scientific investigator, but an archaelogist who can discern how a deeper, often hidden past, conditions the present and therefore the future of learning organizations. Last but not least, I will indicate some parallel positions in organizational theory, notably Schein and Senge and indicate by what specific methods the hidden past of organizations can be uncovered.

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