

# Organizing the Past: An Introduction

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“. . . culture,” Mary Douglas once suggested, “is a possible pattern of meanings inherited from the immediate past, a canopy for the interpretive needs of the present” (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, p. 64). This sense of culture as a past emergent in the interpretive present provides common ground for the articles in this issue.

At first glance, such a definition seems to offer unlimited scope for research. What symbolic aspects of our cultural life are not the product of a dialogue between past and present? Even when the apparent absence of a past appears to be creatively inhibiting (Commager 1967), it still manages to produce inventive and distinctive results (Zenderland 1978). Even when the past’s warehouse of signifiers is felt to be empty and exhausted, it still manages to furnish dialogue and sustenance (Stark 1974). Even when media are accused of ravishing our historical purity, they are employed in circulating images of the past (Rosenstone 1995). Even when abundant architectural flourishes appear to eradicate any contextual knowledge of the past, they still manage to spark a dialogue about the quality of the past in our built present (Relph 1976; Jencks 1987). Perhaps our ongoing fascination with the symbolic uses of the past is a product of such an understanding of culture.

The appearance of a concern for the past and its difference from the present is frequently associated with the European Renaissance. The word itself suggests the burial, decay, and resurrection of both knowledge and artifacts from a time acknowledged as different from our own (Lowenthal 1985, p. 77). This modern concept of the past reaches full flower in the nineteenth century with the appearance of museums, sites which identify and locate our place in such a chronology and mark our distance from other places. This concept of the past as “the duration of intervals” (Elias 1992, p. 36) is part of the “industrialization of culture” (Horne 1986, p. 25) which at once signals our alienation from earlier and often ideal pasts, and at the same time creates the demand for commodified and simulated fragments of the past (Horne 1984; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

This sense of the past as a place in a chronology is the product of an institutional rationality (Walsh 1992). Public and private institutions contribute to the elaboration of this rationality and work to present the past as contained, closed and complete. The theme of this issue, “organizing the past” is an attempt to suggest the incomplete, emergent and dialogic quality of the past. The articles engage the dialogue between past and present stressing the social and organizational nature of the past (Fentress and

Wickham 1992; Connerton 1989). There are at least four contributions these articles make to this dialogue.

Their most obvious contribution, and another feature common to them is an emphasis on ideology. The “possible patterns” made of the past and the “interpretive needs” which make them are products of discourses on power, whether its production or its critique. All the authors link their research to discussions of ideology in organizational studies but their singular contribution is to read ideology in terms of the uses to which the past is put.

Following on this is the rich ethnographic character of these articles. The past is not seen simply as text constructed and read in the present: it is the product of complex and multiple social and institutional forces. The core of each article offers a detailed representation of the organizational world producing and reproducing the ideological practices in question.

Raising the question about the ideological character of the past and approaching its research critically and ethnographically has also meant the expansion of organizational research sites. Public institutions, alternative and oppositional networks, and even whole civilizations are seen as appropriate organizational settings for the articles included here.

Finally, these articles engage with a developing literature on the politics of public memory (Bal 1996; Lavine and Karp 1991). The analysis of the organizational uses of the past invokes a consideration of the oppositional social formations which contest the meaning of the public performance of the past (Bennett 1995; Steiner 1995; Feldman 1994). The significance of this emergent and dialogic aspect of the public past is evident in the distinctive and increasing organizational interventions associated with it (Janes 1994; Ames 1990).

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