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14. Contextualizing the historian: an ANTi-History perspective

Gabie Durepos, Albert J. Mills and Patricia McLaren

At the April 2017 Economic and Social Research Council workshop on organizational history in Exeter, UK, Peter Miskell asked Gabrielle Durepos and Albert Mills ‘who is the ANTi-Historian?’ The group assembled for the small workshop included those most influential (including, but not limited to, Michael Rowlinson, Charles Booth and Peter Clark) in shaping what, over the past 10 years has become ANTi-History. Gabrielle took the liberty to answer simply: as an actor that does critical organizational history, my composition has been shaped by all of you, my network. Thus, I’m an ANTi-Historian, but only by virtue of you. The answer was inspired by a simple actor-network theory concept, actors (me, you) are punctuated networks (groups of other influential academics) that assume their configuration through translating and enrolling actors with similar interests (Callon, 1986). Our reply to Miskell was short and, likely, insufficient. Nonetheless, the question is stimulating. In this chapter, we take the opportunity to develop a more thoughtful answer to: who is the management ANTi-Historian?

The question is timely and important. It is important because it invokes a normative answer that we feel is increasingly problematic. That normative answer is: the historian is the person (human actor) who writes history. Historians assume their status as such by undergoing years of professional academic training where they learn the disciplinary conventions and craft of history and historiography (Marwick, 2001). The training involves acquiring specialized knowledge of existing interpretations in the field and the ability for disciplined reading of primary and secondary sources through which the methods of verification are internalized (Elton, 1967; Munslow, 2006 [1997]). Through this training, historians acquire a licence to legitimately translate stories of the past into history. So, what is the problem with this answer? And, why is it timely?

Calls for an historic turn in 2004 led to increased attention on doing history research in management and organization studies (MOS) (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Üsdiken and Kieser, 2004). Though calls for more history did not result in a wholesale transformation of MOS as had been hoped for, many MOS researchers have taken an active interest in doing history. The attention is evidenced in the numerous edited collections (Bucheli and Wadhwani, 2014; McLaren et al., 2015), special issues (Carter et al., 2002; Cooke et al., 2006; van Baalen and Bogenrieder, 2009; O’Sullivan et al., 2010; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Godfrey et al., 2016) and book length monographs (Durepos and Mills, 2012a; Cummings et al., 2017; Bowden, 2018) published in recent years. Many MOS researchers now do history, but they
are doing it without conventional history training. This begs the question: are they licensed to write history? Can they legitimately translate the past into history?

From a perspective informed by ANTi-History (Durepos and Mills, 2012a, 2012b; Durepos, 2015), the question of who is the historian hints at actors and networks. ANTi-History is an approach to historiography that draws on actor-network theory and postmodern historiography while adding to debates in both areas. It suggests that the content (the what) and process (the how) of doing history are outcomes of the socio-politics of actor-networks. The content (what) of history is mapped by following the actors (Latour, 2005), tracing their associations (asking how they are related to one another) and privileging the actors’ voice over that of the researchers. ANTi-History suggests that researchers map multiple versions of the past. Thus, narratives of the past assume a different essence or configuration depending on the community in which they are rehearsed. The process (how) of doing history is also subject to actor-networks. Actors capture the interests of others, translate those interests and enrol them into durable networks that can hold a particular narrative intact as a plausible version of ‘what happened’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we inform the answer to ‘who is the ANTi-Historian’ in much the same way: she is an actor-network. As an actor, she stands on behalf of a network (of actors) that has taken shape by virtue of relational past experiences. Suggesting the historian is an actor-network challenges us to de-privilege the historian as the sole arbiter of history. It broadens our lens to include the influence of human, non-human and non-corporeal actors who have shaped the historian. Implying that the historian is an actor-network reminds us to consider the (human, non-human and non-corporeal) actors in her surroundings that have helped shape her formative professional development. To the extent that the historian is an outcome of, and stands on behalf of, her historical context, asking who she is necessitates an engagement with the notion of context. As McLaren and Durepos (2015; Stutz and Sachs, 2018) have come to realize, the latter is not a simple task. Though context is oft mentioned in the disciplines of MOS and historical organization studies, it is rarely defined. Even with its high frequency of use, it is vastly undertheorized. Our attempt to answer who is the historian from the perspective of ANTi-History will engage with the notion of context.

Before introducing our chapter structure, we offer some reflexive comments: our chapter is (also) an outcome of an actor-network. We (Durepos, Mills and McLaren) have shared an interest in the subject of historical organization studies and have influenced one another’s thinking on it over the past 12 years. During this time, we have grown to become one another’s respective networks. This is worth noting given this chapter (as an actor) will likely conceal those relationships. Speaking of those relationships, the structure of this chapter draws largely on a 2015 book chapter published by Durepos which was included in an edited book by McLaren, Mills and Weatherbee (2015). To paint context for the question of who is the ANTi-historian, we’ve organized our chapter in three parts. We first discuss the modernist historian and her context, followed by the postmodernist historian and her contexts. Finally, we try to provide a thoughtful answer to who is the (amodernist) ANTi-Historian.
THE MODERNIST HISTORIAN AND HER CONTEXT

Who is the modernist historian, and how does she treat the notion of context? Before we entertain the question, we feel it necessary to clarify what we mean by modern. For us, modern implies a set of ideas rooted in the rhetoric of science, progress and efficiency leading to socio-economic betterment and the privileging of epistemological positivism (Prasad, 2018 [2005]). It does not imply a time period per se, although we acknowledge the temporal situatedness of the rise of the natural science discourse. It instead points to our foci as a particular ideology and discourse that has shaped the epistemological landscape of many academic disciplines, including business history and some strands of management history.

In the modernist condition, management and business historians have assumed the responsibility for writing history in an objective, impartial and disinterested manner (Elton, 1967; Jenkins, 1995). Following Ranke, their task is not to impose judgement on the past but simply to assemble traces into a narrative that resembles what actually happened (Geyl, 1962; White, 1985; Green and Troup, 1999). Mirroring a past reality necessitates that they remove their situated selves from the resultant narrative (Collingwood, 1956; Jenkins, 1995). Accordingly, historians operating in a modern condition avoid interpreting the past from a vantage point informed by present-day concerns and dilemmas (Jenkins, 1995; Goody, 2006). In short, the modernist historian avoids bias by minimizing her intrusion in the narrative. These histories often adopt a third-person voice which helps to effectively erase the historian from the narrative. In doing this, the “illusion of an omniscient, neutral narrator” is created (Zagorin, 2009, p. 72). This is evidenced in Elton’s (1967) rejection of the idea that historians write history through first re-enacting it in their mind (Munslow, 2006 [1997]). As a neutral medium, the historian lets the facts speak for themselves (Barthes, 1967). As Haraway (1988) notes, this creates a view from nowhere and everywhere all at once. For some, this is cause for epistemological concern. Downplaying the shaping hand of the historian conceals their choices in constructing the history. With all the debris of construction hidden, the resultant narrative assumes an essence of reality (Jenkins, 1995).

The way historians who work in the modernist condition approach the craft of history has a series of implications for their treatment of context. In our opinion, they have developed a relatively sophisticated understanding of the concept. Our reading of this genre has surfaced two types of context. First, there is the historian’s context. This is the present context informed by political, environmental, social, economic and legal concerns that surrounds and informs the historian’s day-to-day frame of reference, ideas, thoughts, queries and dilemmas. Second, is the context of the past. This is the context that surrounds the phenomena of interest. Interestingly, historians who work in the modernist condition privilege the past context while minimizing the potential for the present-day context to bias the history.

As noted, modernist historians not only believe they can uncover “history as it actually happened”, but they also aspire to do so (Munslow, 2006 [1997], p. 22). They believe the truth of ‘the before now’ can be obtained from collecting and
piecing together primary and secondary sources. But uncovering the objective truth of the past can only be done without any interference, including the influence from the historian’s present-day context. As noted above, modernist historians seek to act as a neutral medium whose role in shaping the narrative is understated. In excluding the historian’s role in moulding the narrative, her context also seemingly disappears.

Another aspect particular to modernist historians is their desire to produce history for its own sake (Jenkins, 2003). The purpose of doing history is to learn the past for the sake of knowing the past, as opposed to using the past to inform the present. As a result, there is little regard for the present context of the historian which arguably guides and shapes her historical inquisitions (Jenkins, 2003). As Munslow (2006 [1997], p. 46) notes, modernist historians “avoid writing history from the perspective of the present”. Elton (1991, p. 52) explains “we are looking for a way to ground historical reconstruction in something that offers a measure of independent security – independent of the historian, independent of the concerns of his day, independent of the social and political conditions imposed on him”. Thus, there is a belief that the past should be studied free of present-day “ideological contamination” (Munslow, 2006 [1997], p. 20). Munslow (2006 [1997]) suggests this belief stems from the nineteenth-century empiricist tradition, which is equally wary of using any theoretical framework that would impose an a priori order and meaning on traces of the past. Theoretical explanations are understood to bias the past (Marwick, 2001). Because of their avoidance of explanatory frameworks, Munslow (2006 [1997]) has suggested these hard-line empiricists are atheoretical.

So far, we have explained that modernist historians work to minimize the influence of the present-day context on the past. Their treatment of the context found in the past is vastly different. Because modernist historians believe that the meaning of primary sources is found in their context, a deep immersion in the past context is necessary to foster a valid and accurate understanding. The belief is that the contextualization of the event gives the event its accurate meaning. As Munslow (2006 [1997], p. 62) offers, modernist “historians generally continue to rely on the common sense notion that they will locate the knowable external presence to the text in the context”. The referent of the text is found in the context. As Grattan (2008, p. 175) notes, the historian must “empathize with the period in question” and develop a sympathetic knowledge of the ideas and essence of society at that time. To effectively evaluate and make sense of a trace, historians must be fully immersed in the respective period. Events in the past can only be understood in relation to the broader context.

In summary, modernist historians contextualize past traces while controlling for their present context. Their contribution comes from shedding light on a past event by placing it in context.

A point we wish to highlight based on this discussion is that modernist historians treat context as a stable container of the past. The context is that in which the past is placed so that its meaning and significance can be understood. Research communities that perform this type of history are plentiful. Munslow (2006 [1997]) suggests that ‘extreme empiricists’, including Geoffrey Elton and Arthur Marwick, treat context in this manner.
Decker’s (2014) historical research on architecture in Africa is an illustrative example of some of the points made above. Her study draws on archival research to place African architecture in its historical context. Decker’s (2014, p. 521) phenomena of interest are buildings and her archival ethnography suggests they “be researched in the context of their creation”. Despite drawing on the notion of context 15 times in the article, context is not defined. However, underlying assumptions on historical context can be surmised in how she treats the concept. It appears that historical context is likened to an unshifting vessel in which a past phenomenon is placed to better understand it. For example, Decker (2014, p. 515) notes that “… the way people experience architecture is embedded in a specific time and context …” and thus buildings should be “… interpreted more fully by reference to the archival sources and the historical context of their creation” (2014, p. 514). Context is treated as the stable container of the past. Decker (2014, p. 521) tries to get at “a better understanding of the historical context …” as it seems that putting the phenomenon of interest in its ‘context’ allows the historian to reveal “multiple layers of meanings” (2014, p. 521). According to Decker (2014), this leads to a more fulsome understanding of how companies make sense of African architecture. Though our understanding of African architecture is expected to shift with archival ethnography, what is not considered is the idea that the context may have been created in relation to the phenomenon of interest (and not just the other way around). Thus, what we propose is that shifting understandings of the phenomenon of interest will inevitably shift the context.

We have discussed the modernist historian and how she treats the notion of context. We now entertain the postmodernist historian and her contexts.

THE POSTMODERN HISTORIAN AND HER CONTEXTS

Who is the postmodernist historian? How does she treat her contexts? Caveats are in order before we share our (partial) answers to these questions, including clarification on what we mean by postmodern. Similar to our description of the modernist condition, postmodern for the sake of our argument refers to a set of ideas that are characteristic of a social, political, economic and epistemological condition rather than a period of time (Lyotard, 1993; Prasad, 2018 [2005]). Lyotard (1993, p. xxiv) describes the postmodern condition as “incredulity toward metanarratives”, including progress through the sciences and its associated societal legitimacy. As a reaction to a condition described as modernist, postmodernism is a set of ideas intended to deconstruct and problematize normalized equations including that of associating progress and efficiency unequivocally with social betterment. Characteristic of ‘the postmodern condition’ (Ermarth, 2011) is a strong rejection of epistemological positivism and its privileging of knowledge claims as objective and (singular) truths. In the academic field of history, the postmodern condition has led to descriptions of history as the construction of plural, rather than truthful, knowledge of the past (White, 1973; Ermarth, 1992; Jenkins, 1995; Munslow, 2006 [1997]).
With this, we return to our question: who is the postmodernist historian and how does she treat her contexts? Simply put, our reading of the postmodern historiography literature suggests to us that the postmodern historian is the person who assumes responsibility for investigating the past according to a set of academic conventions and translating knowledge of the past into historical narratives.

In rejecting the modernist idea that facts can speak for themselves through a neutral medium called the historian, postmodern historians have noted that it is the historian and not the past that dictates what happens in history (Jenkins, 2003). As Collingwood (1956, p. 236) writes, “It is the artist, and not nature, that is responsible for what goes into the picture. In the same way, no historian, not even the worst, merely copies out his authorities.” History from this perspective is knowledge of the past transformed as such by the historian (Jenkins, 1995). Kalela (2012, p. 11) explains that historians working in the twenty-first century have faced a new type of “professional self-awareness” which has come with increased attention to their choices of representation. Recognising that the past has no a priori narrative structure, the many decisions historians make in translating the past into historical narrative have become a key component of the historical narrative itself (Jenkins, 2009). The postmodern historian not only assumes the responsibility for writing history but acknowledges that part of this responsibility entails situating themselves as part of that narrative and rendering explicit how their decisions have shaped it (reflexivity: a point to which we return). As such, doing history in the postmodern condition has meant recognizing that the historical narrative is a product of a present-centred and ideologically-situated historian. This is evidenced in the scholarship of a central figure of postmodern history – Michel Foucault. Foucault places the historian at the centre of the process of constructing knowledge of the past (Munslow, 2006 [1997]).

With this in mind, we offer an observation whose full relevance will only become apparent when we discuss ANTi-Historians in the next section. It is that the process of writing history in a postmodern condition is cognitive and, thus, embrained. History is the product of the historian’s thought process and ordering efforts. History is interpretations of the past made present in the contemporary historian’s mind (Jenkins, 1991, 1995). History in the postmodern condition is the outcome of the individual, not the outcome of a community or network (as we suggest later).

It is through historians’ ‘cognitive’ choices of representation that they encounter a shapeless past and make a series of decisions that give it form, order and meaning (Jenkins, 2003). The historian consults sources that are found in archives or otherwise, ascribes importance to certain sources over others, arranges the sources in a particular order to achieve significance and then, using literary devices, constructs a narrative to achieve historical coherence (White, 1985; Jenkins, 1995, 2003). Doing history is ordering work: there is no escape from the narrative-creating labour of the historian. Mirroring history to the past is impossible as we cannot verify the accuracy of the past by the evidence or check the history by corroborating it against the past. The past is gone, what is left are traces, and even then, what counts as ‘traces’ are the outcome of cognitive decisions. As such, postmodern historians can never aspire to complete descriptions but can only offer up their analysis “as one way among many”
to represent phenomena in the field (White, 1985). In a postmodern condition, plural knowledge of the past is celebrated.

The tools available to postmodern historians to assist in their craft are plentiful (White, 1973). For example, the historian works using a variety of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and modes of emplotment (White, 1973). Each tool will impose a specific shape on a historical narrative. These tools are ideological and their essence is influenced by present-day academic conventions (Jenkins, 1995). Because it is historians who both create the tools and then use them, historians are inevitably involved in the moment of historical writing (Kellner, 1997). In the postmodern condition, this realization has been addressed through the idea of reflexivity.

Reflexivity involves a hyper self-awareness on the part of the historian. It involves situating the narrative as an active construction of the historian and revealing how her choices of representation have shaped it. Reflexivity de-privileges a historian as the sole arbiter and authoritative voice of history. It encourages us to consider that all histories are provisional if only due to the politics of knowledge construction and the partiality of any representation (Gunn, 2006). It urges us to critically acknowledge that all historians are situated, thus they are grounded in a time and place which shapes their perspective. Historians write in the moment called ‘now’. As such, it is not only assumed but expected that the present-day ‘context’ will influence her choices of representation.

In our description of the modernist historians’ context, we noted that the past context is privileged while minimizing or controlling for the contaminating impact of the present context. For historians working in a postmodern condition, the impact of the present-day context on the historian and her historical narrative is not only unavoidable but readily acknowledged. It is in the present that the questions asked are shaped. In the postmodern condition, the past is studied to illuminate the present and future. Doing history for its own sake (reconstructing what happened or explaining the past just to know it) loses all reverence. Historians in the postmodern condition answer theirs and society’s contemporary questions, speculations and problems by interrogating the past. Through studying the past, we clarify phenomena in the present. The past and its history are the context of the present.

Following Foucault’s (1979, 1982) archaeology and genealogy, many postmodern historians construct histories of the present. As Munslow (2006 [1997], p. 63) notes, Foucault is sceptical of the belief that historians could “step outside history, capture the context, and be objective”. Instead, Foucault and other postmodernist historians have treated knowledge of the past as today’s context. Their focus has been on using the past to foster a deeper and fuller understanding of a present-day phenomenon. Postmodernists’ questions are shaped by those concerns, questions and queries pertinent today. Lawrence (1984, p. 307) calls this “historical perspective”. Its objective is to “sharpen one’s vision of the present, not the past”. Historical perspective means using historical information about a particular subject to explain its contemporary occurrences more lucidly. As Lawrence (1984, p. 308) notes, historical perspective brings “contemporary events into clearer focus”. This view of history as context has been adopted by those working in the field of historical organization.
studies that adopt a postmodern position. Here postmodernist historians draw on the past to either re-conceptualize a normative phenomenon in hopes of disturbing the commonly accepted explanation or shed light on the past instances of a phenomenon to develop that phenomenon theoretically. In the latter, historical perspective helps to expand “research horizons” by offering novel ways to study longstanding questions (Lawrence, 1984, p. 311). Far from the modernist’s ‘own sake-ism’, historical perspective lets us “study the past to illuminate the present” (Hartley, 2006, p. 278).

Though we have only featured Foucault’s research thus far, the research communities, theories and methodologies that operate according to postmodern assumptions on history and context are plentiful. Examples include Munslow’s (2006 [1997]) deconstructionism and White’s (1973) metahistory and postmodern discourse analysis. Examples from the field of historical organization studies are also numerous and it is to these that we turn our attention (Parker, 2002; Zald, 2002; Cooke et al., 2005; Maielli, 2007; Suddaby et al., 2010; Glass, 2015; Cummings et al., 2017).

Cooke et al. (2005) provide an historical organization studies example of the treatment of context in the postmodern condition. Their paper illustrates the “consequences of embedding management theory within the Cold War context for management scholarship and practice” (2005, p. 130). Specifically, their research concerns the role of the Cold War context in shaping our current understanding of Abraham Maslow’s theory of motivation and motivation generally. In doing so, the authors effectively demonstrate that “Cold War ideology merits so much attention in 2005, then because it is the context within which present-day institutional and conceptual boundaries of our field were established” (Cooke et al., 2005, p. 130). The authors not only demonstrate that history is the context of today, but they convince us of the importance of considering it in theorizing present-day management. They note that “not only should we take the Cold War into account as a context in the postwar development of management ideas but rather it should be considered as the context, as a grand narrative, or at least one of a few grand narratives within accounts of management should be situated” (Cooke et al., 2005, p. 150).

Cooke et al. (2005) draw on the past to re-conceptualize normative definitions of Maslow and motivation. The authors successfully reveal “new explanations of Maslow’s life” (2005, p. 129). While narratives of Maslow’s life are presented as social constructions that vary based on the context in which he is placed, we get the impression that they treat the Cold War context as a stable backdrop against which we can place phenomena to generate a new understanding of it. In this study, the authors “put both Maslow’s life and work, in the Cold War context”, giving us the impression that the past context is a container in which we can place phenomenon (Cooke et al., 2005, p. 132) to create alternative meanings.

Aside from drawing on context to re-conceptualize understanding of Maslow and motivation, Cooke et al. (2005) use the past to extend theory in management. The authors map “the contextual influences on the production of organizational and management knowledge” to explain “how and why current understandings of organization and management theory are, for all their situating of themselves in a linear narrative of historical progress, largely ahistorical, functionalist, consensus driven,
and status quo oriented” (Cooke et al., 2005, p. 130). Their study yields deeper insights on the study of motivation, itself.

Embedded in Cooke et al.’s (2005) study is a problematization of singular histories and a ready acknowledgement that any account of history is partial. As noted, the celebration of plural histories is a hallmark of postmodern histories. The authors note (2005, p. 145) that their “account of Maslow has been brief, and partial” but has shown extant “accounts of his life, certainly as they have appeared or are assumed in the management literature, are one dimensional”.

The re-conceptualization of Maslow’s theory of motivation is but one example of many that draw on the past as the context of the present. The potential that the past can bring in extending theory is well recognized (Zald, 1996). For example, Prasad (1997, p. 286) “seeks to theorize workplace diversity within the wider context of the (continuing?) history and experience of Euro-American imperialism and colonialism”. Booth and Rowlinson (2006, pp. 7–8) note that “Rewriting race … gender … and sexuality … into organization theory should also entail historical contextualization”.

We have discussed examples of postmodern historical organization studies research above to suggest that this body of work makes implicit assumptions about the notion of context. Before proceeding to our discussion of who is the ANTi-Historian, we summarize three points on the treatment of context in a postmodern condition.

As we have suggested above, historical analysis in the postmodern condition is the vehicle for placing contemporary organizations and their practices in their past context. Our first point is that in this condition, history is understood as the context of the present. This means that all histories are inevitably “present-centered” (Jenkins, 1995, p. 163; White, 1973; Mannheim, 1985). As White (1985) notes, it is contemporary historians that establish the value of the study of the past. They do so “not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time” (White, 1985, p. 41). The latter is worth emphasizing: each epoch develops its own specific cultural, economic and political problems. Histories of the present are shaped specifically to explore the past of these problems. The objective is not simply to ‘discover’ the past but to explain it and through this clarify the present. This genre of history is aligned with Jenkins (2003, p. 35) who notes that “the past/history really is a sort of containing object which we are somehow in: ‘You can never get out of the/your past’; ‘the past is both all around us and in us’.” In summary, our first point is that we have a past. And, the postmodern historian’s role is to draw on it to contextualize the present.

The assertion that history is the context of the present comes with consequences. This leads us to our second point which we make using a comparison of context as container. In a postmodern condition, it is assumed that histories (of the present, thus of the contemporary phenomena) are socially constructed based on the historian’s choice of representation. Thus, histories change based on the historian’s ideology and mode of emplotment. Here is what has troubled us in this condition: though there is agreement that the phenomenon of study is socially constructed, its context is seemingly assumed to ‘pre-exist’ it. The context is treated akin to a stable and structurally
sound ‘container’ in which we place contemporary phenomena to give it shape and composition. This gives the impression that historical context is a stable backdrop or background of the phenomenon of interest. In changing the backdrop or background, various possibilities for representing the phenomenon are offered. With the help of the container (historical context) – content (presently occurring phenomenon) comparison, we argue that an assumption of postmodern historical organization studies is that changing the historical context will change the composition of the phenomenon. In short, the container changes the shape of the content. This gives us ontological discomfort. How can the container be described as ontologically real and the phenomenon or content as socially constructed, all within the bounds of one academic study?

This leads us to our third point. Contrary to modernist aspirations to minimize the contaminating impact of the present on shaping the past, postmodern historians readily acknowledge their contemporary academic context in which exist tools for emplotting the past. It is assumed that present modes of emplotment will be drawn upon to give structure to the past events (White, 1973; Jenkins, 1995). These modes of emplotment are contemporary cultural artefacts, they “come ‘before’ the narrative and pre-figure (set up) the field” (Jenkins, 1995, p. 168). Thus, the contemporary academic context of the historians offers tools to help configure the past as history. Far from biasing the reading of the past, the use of these tools serves to inform the present.

**THE AMODERN ANTI-HISTORIAN**

In the sections above, we mapped the context for our answer to who is the ANTi-Historian. The context includes academic conversations surrounding who is the management historian in both the modern and postmodern condition. It is from a disenchantment with historiography in the modern and postmodern condition that our answer to who is the ANTi-Historian has emerged.

Elsewhere, we explain that the ANTi-Historian operates in an amodern condition (Durepos, 2015). The notion of amodern is adopted from Latour (1990, 1993) who suggests that we have never been modern. To the extent that postmodernism is a reaction to the modern, Latour (1993) notes that it too is untenable. For Latour (1990), an amodern condition is characterized by a transcendence of the nature–society divide, which was forced upon us in the modern condition. In the modern condition, the study of nature was relegated to the academic sphere of the natural sciences and society to that of the social sciences. Latour (1990, 1993, 2005) has observed that in practice, the social and nature are inextricably intertwined. Based on this, he questions why we study them separately. Latour (1993) proposes a symmetry of analysis where society, nature, and their relations are treated with the same sociological curiosity. In the amodern condition ‘society’, ‘sociology’ and ‘context’ are no longer used to provide explanations but rather become what needs to be explained. Their composition becomes the central focus. This brief description of an amodern condition is to suggest that like conditions of modern and postmodern, we treat amodern as
a set of ideas rather than a time frame. In this section, we draw on Latour’s conception of a modern and actor-networks to illustrate who is the ANTi-Historian and offer thoughts on the notion of context.

In the amodern history that we envision, the past is transformed into history in practice. It follows that using ANTi-History means viewing history as a practice rather than a profession (Kalela, 2012). Implied in this assertion is an active de-centring of the historian in the production of history. Rather than seeing history as a cognitive outcome of the historian, as would the modern and postmodern historians, it is seen as the outcome of communities or networks. This position de-privileges the historian as the sole producer and keeper of history. We agree with Kalela (2012, p. 1) that history is “by no means the prerogative of historians”. Our suggestion to shift the focus from the historian to practice is intended to have “people addressed as creators of their own histories” (Kalela, 2012, p. 53). Indeed, people create their own histories daily, largely without the involvement of professional historians. The shift to practice involves recognizing that “actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it” (Latour, 1999, p. 19). In an amodern condition, ‘explanations’ of history intended to clarify for a population why and what happened in the past are viewed as problematic. The shift to practice entails recognizing that it is the historian and not the actors who lacks knowledge of the latter’s practice. Acknowledging that histories are made in practice involves learning “from the actors without imposing on them an a priori definition of their world-building capacities” (Latour, 1999, p. 20). With this, we begin to formulate an answer to the question: who is the ANTi-Historian? She is an actor-network that follows the actors and learns from them the composition of their past and how they transform it into history in their day-to-day practices. This begs the question, which actors does she follow and where?

Following insights from actor-network theory, we argue that history is practised in human–nonhuman associations everywhere. While some histories have recognizable (sole) authors, many are spoken and written communally. These, for example, are produced in families, groups of friends, colleagues or neighbourhoods. They are imagined and drawn upon to make sense of and manage present circumstances. Far from the modern conception of history, these actors are not detached bystanders of an independently operating history. Rather, they are involved in the daily practice of enacting the past into history. Corrigan (2016) demonstrates this point well in his study of the budget making practices of historically situated accountants. His research traces budget disputes between the municipality of Halifax and the historic community of Africville, over time. In the 1960s, the people of Africville (Black loyalists who were escaped slaves and free Blacks) who lived along the harbour in Halifax (Canada) “were relocated to public housing by Halifax civic authorities” (Corrigan, 2016, p. 81). In subsequent years, the Africville community was deprived of municipality budget funding (despite promises otherwise) and assumed a reputation as a slum and ghetto. Over the years, three ‘histories’ of Africville developed in the Halifax Regional Municipality budget sessions that would be used to justify the amount of funding allocated to Africville. Corrigan (2016) labels them as a history
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of neglect, aggression and romance. Each took shape at a particular point in time between the 1960s and the present. These are different versions of the same past. The example serves to show that histories are made in practice. They shift, change and evolve every day. Based on this, we argue that history making is iterative and fluid. Following Law (2008, p. 21), we suggest that “particular realities” of the past and history are constructed in the practice of actor-networks. And, the ANTi-Historian participates in the actor-networks. The actor-network is the ANTi-Historian.

What to make of (historical) contexts in an amodern condition? Our answer draws on Latour’s (1986, 2005) actor-networks. As ANTi-Historians participate in the history-making activities of actor-networks, they join as members. In doing so, they participate in building the context. In an amodern condition, it is the practices of actors that build the context. Far from the modernist and postmodernist view that context is a ready-made container that precedes the phenomena of study, context in an amodern condition is what is created through the world-building activities of actor-networks. The shift to actor practices comes with a focus on how actors associate with one another to negotiate their past. It is through the discussions of actor-networks that temporary resolutions concerning questions including ‘what happened in the past’ and ‘why’ are formed (Latour, 1986). As these conversations sediment on one another, context is created. Thus, context is constructed through actors’ practices to negotiate the past into history. Far from using context to explain (past or presently occurring) phenomena, context in an amodern condition is what actor-networks create as they negotiate history. Context is not what is used to explain but rather, what (as in, its composition) needs to be explained.

Can we comfortably do away with the idea of an a priori and over-arching context? Can we accept that actors build the context and not the other way around (Latour, 2005)? Can we find solace in watching the construction of contexts as actor-networks leave traces of their conversations that feature their temporary settlements on history? Can we start asking, as does Latour (1986, p. 271) “how does it hold together?” These questions push us to meddle with chronology. In the modern condition, context was situated in the past. In the postmodern condition, historical context was arguably also in the past, although historians drew on it in the present as an instrumental ingredient of explanations. In an amodern condition, contexts are the effect, the by-product, the accumulation of traces that actors make through their efforts to do history. The contexts of histories are in the making, now. Context is not the container that holds intact the composition of a narrative. Context is not one of many ingredients of history. Rather, it is the collection of the remnants of actor negotiations on what is past. And, asking ‘what’ is the context means asking how those remnants hold together (Latour, 2005).

In the preceding paragraphs, we suggested that actors build the context (Latour, 2005). This begs the question, who are these actors? Which actors build the context? Our answer is by no means definitive as we only mention a few types of actors here. In ‘reality’, the actors that build the context are countless. Nonetheless, our simplified answer is twofold. First, there are human and non-human actors that speak to the past (artefacts, documents, letters and diaries) and present (interviews with witnesses
or community storytellers). These ‘traces’ of the past are not predetermined as such. Rather, they assume their status through a process of designation: an historian actively labels some things as ‘traces’ and ignores other things, which, by default, are not traces. In designating something a trace, meaning is infused into it. The meaning can shift over time. Second is the (ANTI-)Historian who follows and assembles their traces. In an amodern condition, actors build the context with the help of the historian. This begs the question: what role does the ANTi-Historian play in building the context? Does she also create (her very own academic) context in her practice of inscribing the past as history?

The task of a researcher engaged in an amodern analysis is to follow the actors through time, mapping their narrative of the past and the contexts it creates. An ANTi-Historian assists actors in delegating their ‘context building activities’ to paper. The act of inscribing an oral narrative to text results in a new non-human actor, a history. The ANTi-Historians’ objective is to assist the actor-network in building a material delegation with potential for durability. Far from an all-seeing god’s view, the ANTi-Historian only sees what the actor-network enables. Without any hope for a complete picture, the historian’s task is not one of providing historical explanations. Instead she describes and inscribes. Her job is to trace the actors and document how they build the story, account or narrative. And, each time she describes and inscribes, she connects with actors, builds her own networks and thus, her own context.

We have noted that actors build their context and offered some ideas concerning which actors construct it. Our next question concerns, which contexts? It is tempting to categorize the answer in two parts. First, there are the contexts of the actors under study (the context of past events). Second, there is the context of the researcher (the academic context of the study). The problem is that adopting this crude categorization would lead us to overlook their inter-connections. Our suggestion is that these contexts are co-produced and interdependent. The historian’s academic context is produced through her research, which involves following actor-networks as they perform the past as history. In describing and inscribing actor-network trails, she contributes to and participates in creating their context. The relationship between contexts is arguably the most important aspect in understanding the constitution of each.

To answer the question concerning ‘which context’ plausibly, we surface the idea of multiplicity (Mol, 1999). If actor-networks build contexts in different sets of practice, it follows that both their practices and contexts are multiple. Far from the postmodern idea that an historian offers different and thus plural perspectives (knowledge produced through a cognitive view) on the past that is influenced by her ideological framework, multiplicity implies narratives on the past produced in different sets of practice. For example, the past of an event can be negotiated into history in a church, a home and in the municipal town hall meeting. Sometimes, an event is discussed differently in different locations. Sometimes an event is discussed differently in the same location across time. Our point is that the event takes a different flavour depending on how the respectively situated actor-networks translate it into an historical narrative. Bettin and Mills (2018) illustrate this point in their study of the different interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir over time. Thus, actor-networks
do history in practice but vary the version of the past based on when (point in time) and where (location) it is told. Not only are the histories told multiple but also the contexts they create.

We have noted throughout our discussion that “any practice creates its own context” (Latour, 1990, p. 169). In doing so, we have anticipated the idea that contexts do not pre-exist. To elaborate, we have problematized the idea that contexts are pre-fabricated and can be used to frame the past and history. In summary, our opinion has been that contexts are not ready-made containers that we can draw upon as explanatory frameworks of the past. We review this to be explicit about two related points. First, contexts do not pre-exist the practices of actor-networks. As Latour (2005, p. 4) notes, “actors are never embedded in a social context”. Second, contexts do not pre-exist their (academic) study. As Latour (2005, p. 143) asks, “have you ever met a painter who began his masterpiece by first choosing the frame?” Much in the same way, it would be odd to assume the context of the study prior to undertaking it. To say that the past is shaped by its context, or the historical acts as the context of the present, reveals little about the composition of each. Our concern, using ANTil-History, is to trace the composition of the past-as-history and its resultant context. This is how we arrive at ‘what’ (content) is history and ‘what’ is context.

This surfaces a related question, which is ‘how’ to trace the past-as-history and context. The answer lies in mapping the actor-networks who are involved in their composition. We have suggested that context is that which is created through our efforts to describe it (Latour, 2005). Elements that eventually act as ingredients of context circulate as actors form networks in which plausible stories of the past are negotiated and settled. Local interactions where one actor meets or connects with another, for example, through an interview, a letter or memo, are valuable places to begin tracing associations. The point is to look for connections. Where are conversations had, where do they take shape? The answer is likely in individual practices. Indeed, it is in local practices that conversations change direction. This makes our task relatively simple, yet very tedious. It is to follow, describe and inscribe social ties. Doing this reveals trails of associations between actors. It reveals ways in which they are connected. It shows us the content actors settle on as their history. It shows us the process through which they negotiate that story. It allows us to map the topography of the past by mapping the relations of actors that hold them intact as networks. Eventually the framework that actors (themselves) have created surfaces. In this way, we suggest, their context comes into being. How to trace the actor-networks involved in translating the past into history is demonstrated in Myrick et al.’s (2013) research on the making of the Academy of Management (a prominent North American academic conference). In the article, the authors explore the role of history construction in the emergence of the Academy of Management Conference.

Accessing contexts involves tracing actor-network associations and relations that hold the past intact. Far from the modernist and postmodernist idea of putting the past into (a ready-made) context, the path we propose is likely more tedious. Our suggestion is to trace the actor-networks from the past as well as those that concern themselves with the past for the purpose of creating the context while documenting
what holds it intact. In summary, our answer to what is an amodern context is as follows: It is composed of a trail of associations of multifarious connections between heterogeneous actors.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of our chapter has been to offer a more thoughtful answer to the question: who is the ANTi-Historian? To help formulate an answer, we mapped an academic context in which extant discussions about who is the historian and how does she treat context are had. For ease of explanation, we used the modern–postmodern divide to categorize the conversation. In expressing our discomfort with each set of ideas and their implications for history and context, we offered some thoughts on who is the ANTi-Historian. Our chapter suggested that the ANTi-Historian is an actor-network. In these closing reflections, we feel strongly about problematizing this seemingly ‘singular’ answer. Embedded in our chapter discussion have been three descriptors of the ANTi-Historian. First, she is an embodied human actor who plays a key role in following actors and learning from them the histories that she will eventually describe and inscribe. Second, we have made a number of suggestions pointing to the ANTi-Historian as, itself, an actor-network. Thus, an actor-network of which the researcher is a part. In becoming enrolled, she brings her support for the interests of other actors and their preferences. A third embedded notion is the potential idea of the ANTi-Historian as an ongoing outcome of the oscillation between an actor-network and the past as history. This third interpretation attunes us to the researcher’s own part in the processes of enrolment, translation and fixing any given ‘history’. The researcher’s role in translating the past as history should be continually surfaced, reflected upon and questioned. We should keep detailed notes on it because it is not only part of the composition of history but an active ingredient in the construction of an academic context.

What does this teach us about history, context and historical context? Our answer is that history and context are in the making. They are made in various sets of practices. Context cannot be treated like pre-packaged frozen pie shells that we use to support our filling. It must be mapped in much the same manner that we trace the past as history. Far from adding context to explain the past (modern) or the present (postmodern), we suggest that it is the context itself that needs to be described. ANTi-History can help us describe the context.

Finally, do we need a licence to write history? What has this chapter taught us about our normative understanding of the historian’s professional identity which achieves legitimacy through a specific type of academic training? Our efforts in mapping ANTi-History have been dedicated to leveraging the idea that the historian is not the sole arbiter of history. We have done this by challenging the normative definition of the historian. This begs the question: what type of training might an ANTi-Historian require? Simply put, she must practise patience and listen, follow, describe and inscribe. She must have faith that those actors involved in the past offer
the best descriptions on how it’s made (process) and what it’s made of (content). She must trust that the actors themselves are the experts and thus, hold their own licence on their past. She must practise to ‘read’ actor practices, and learn their language. Using ANTi-History, we suggest that (all) historians should follow the actors and learn from them.

REFERENCES


