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HISTORIOGRAPHY, CAUSALITY, AND POSITIONING: AN UNSYSTEMATIC VIEW OF ACCOUNTING HISTORY

Abstract: The article reviews recent developments in accounting historiography in relation to the underlying positioning of the participants. It finds that accounting history has located itself within the tradition of social science, which subsumes events into generalizations and generalizations into theory. It reviews the efficacy of causal theories of human behavior and proposes an alternative non-theoretical approach.

INTRODUCTION

In a thought-provoking, short article, Slocum [1995, p. 21] suggested that the phenomenon of history repeating itself occurs when the need for survival, coupled to the desire to take the easiest course, determines the path that is chosen. The implication is that there is a pattern to human activity, and that it is possible to theorize causal relationships. This chain of reasoning underlies the various accounting historiographical paradigms which seek to explain accounting activities and accounting change in terms of the pursuit of wealth through rational decision making (economic rationalist), the subjection of the forces of production through capitalism (Marxist), or the exercise of power through knowledge and symbolic representation (Foucauldian). The resultant causal structures are not the same. Authors maintain that the economic-rationalist paradigm tends towards a mechanistic view of cause and effect, whereas the other schools are more dynamic in that they focus on the processes of change by which new situations and practices are

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brought into being [Hopwood, 1981, p. 294; Mouck, 1995, pp. 74-78]. The Foucauldian emphasis on discontinuity [Fleischman and Tyson, 1997, pp. 92-97], that it is anachronistic to interpret the past as an extension of the present, in no way prevents the "dynamics that come to drive the power-knowledge interaction" [Hoskin et al., 1997, p. 3] from being theorized. Rather, the question becomes, when did conditions exist for them to operate? When did the modern world begin [Hoskin et al., 1997, p. 2]? These three models are merely illustrative rather than representative of the full genre of theoretical studies, which is extremely diverse. Young [1995], for example, adopted the theoretical concept of "regulatory space," Walker [1995] that of "critical-conflict," and Walker and Shackleton [1995] "British corporatism" to explain historical events within a single volume of *Accounting, Organizations and Society*.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the limitations of a theoretical approach to accounting history. It is therefore unashamedly reactionary, as theoretical history has gained ground in recent years [Fleischman and Tyson, 1997, p. 97]. Undoubtedly, the discipline of accounting history has been stimulated as a result, although some "traditional" accounting historians have felt that they are being "goaded and ridiculed" by the "energetic proponents of the new" [Funnell, 1998, p. 142]. The article commences by reviewing trends in accounting historiography over the last 25 years, before moving on to consider the nature and limitations of causal theories of accounting behavior. It argues that (1) the terminology that has been applied to research directions in accounting history is confused; that (2) accounting historiography has become more theoretical under the stimulus of "critical" scholarship; that (3) causal theories are undermined by the volatile elements of accident and personality which are not susceptible to prediction; and that (4) the present emphasis on theorizing causation is a reflection of the accounting discipline's own search for identity, coupled to the anthropic fallacy of historical reasoning, which places the historian at the center of the historical universe and uses the past to justify his/her view of the present.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

In recent years, accounting history has moved closer to the center of accounting research, and the nature and aims of the discipline have come under increasing scrutiny. Table 1 illustrates the range of classifications that have been applied to

accounting history over the last 25 years, as scholars have attempted to rationalize accounting history's place in accounting research. These classifications and their linkages are useful because they illumine the underlying historiographical trends.

TABLE 1
Chronological Categorization of Accounting History

Author	Classifications	Linkages	Author	Classifications	Linkages
1970 AAA	Intellectual, Utilitarian		1987 Hopwood	Technical-rationalist	Progressive improvement
1974 Goldberg	Accounting practice Accounting thought			Critical	Complex dynamics
1975 Johnson	Economic history Accounting history	Growth of organizations Evolution of accounting procedures	1989 Napier	Traditional Sociohistorical	Discovers the past; Evolutionary Contextualizes the past; Discontinuous
1977 Baladouni	Cultural, Technological, Social			New positivism	Tests predictions
1981 Yamey	Descriptive Interpretive	Situation specific Wider setting	1990 Previts, Parker, & Coffman	Narrative, Interpretational	
1981 Parker	Evolutionary, Revolutionary		1990 Flesher & Samson	Descriptive, Interpretive, Predictive	
1981 Hopwood	Processes and consequences of change Development of technical practice	Social, economic, and institutional context; Theoretical Noncontextual; Atheoretical	1991 Miller, Hopper, & Laughlin 1993 Merino & Mayper	New Traditional Traditional	Inter-disciplinary Disciplinary Economic rationalist; Hierarchical documentary model
1986 Johnson	Littleton school New	Technical; Mechanistic; Evolutionary Organizational Problematic; Discontinuous		Critical	Hidden discourses; Non-privileging of primary sources

TABLE 1 (Continued)
Chronological Categorization of Accounting History

Author	Classifications	Linkages	Author	Classifications	Linkages
1993 Miller & Napier	Genealogies of calculation	Outcomes of the past	1996 Funnell	Traditional	Positivist; Econocentric; Objective, knowable reality
	Traditional accounting history	Evolutionary origins of the present		New	Nonpositivist; Sociocentric
1996 Cooper & Puxty	Traditional	Mechanical/ technical	1997 Fleischman & Tyson	Postmodernist	No reality separate from text; Facts are dethroned
	Revisionist	Organizational context		Critical/ New/ Postmodernist	Nonprimacy of facts; Data substituted with theory; Wider variety of contexts
	Marxist/ Foucauldian	Political insights			
1996 Fleischman, Mills, & Tyson	Conventional	Descriptive			
	Critical	Interpretive			
1996 Fleischman, Kalbers, & Parker	Traditional	Economic rationalist		Traditional/ Old	Knowable objective reality; Archive based; Narrower economic focus
	Critical	Foucauldian; Marxist/labor process			
1996 Carnegie & Napier	Early studies	History glorifying accountants & accounting	1998 Funnell	Traditional	Narrative
	Utilitarian studies	Informing the present		New	Counter- narrative
	Critical/ economic decision-making studies	Encouraging particular modes of explanation			

Different layers of meaning can be deduced from the table. First, as new research methodologies have manifested themselves, the exponents of the "new" have been keen to draw a distinction between their brand of history and what has gone before, the "traditional." However, the nature of this dichotomy is confused, which the table's linkages clearly show. For instance, the Foucauldian and Marxist worldviews have been

characterized as “critical” because they try to render the familiar economic-rationalist view unfamiliar, by focusing on the hidden, unarticulated aspects of the accounting discipline [Merino and Mayper, 1993, pp. 238-239]. Thus, the economic rationalist viewpoint has been said to constitute “traditional” history, although the term also applies to studies which are descriptive in nature rather than interpretive [Fleischman et al., 1996b, p. 66], and which chart the technical development of accounting practice without contextualizing it [Hopwood, 1981, p. 295]. In this scheme, the discovery of technical data by “traditionalists” is still regarded as useful, albeit at the least publishable level of historical activity [Flesher and Samson, 1990, p. 3], because it provides fodder for the “contextualisers” to theorize [Napier, 1989, p. 250]. But, this implies a lack of interest on the part of traditional historians in causal relationships, which is quite inconsistent with the notion that they are also economic rationalists. Carnegie and Napier [1996, p. 14] acknowledged this situation by linking critical and economic-rationalist studies together as both encouraging particular modes of explanation. Furthermore, “traditional” accounting histories have also been critiqued as those which follow an evolutionary or Darwinian model of accounting improvement from a less perfect past to a more perfect present [Hopwood, 1987, pp. 209-210; Napier, 1989, p. 244], a view also known as the “Whig interpretation of history” [Butterfield, 1973, p. 9], implying a causal model based on the natural selection of accounting techniques in which the “strongest” survive. It follows that there is some confusion in the terms that have been applied to accounting history over the last 25 years, which have multiplied as researchers have attempted to resolve disagreements over research aims and to rationalize the place of history in mainstream accounting research.

Second, Table 1 illustrates the extent to which research directions in accounting history have become an issue in the 1990s. This paradigmatic diversity is both a reflection of its increasing maturity as a discipline and the continuing rise in numbers of new entrants, since 1980, who come from different backgrounds, replete with their own baggage and agendas. Miller et al. [1991, p. 396] cited anthropology, economics, history of science, organization theory, and sociology as providing examples. Parker’s [1980, pp. 26-28; 1988, pp. 76-81] accounting history bibliographies give some indication of scale. In the nine years to 1977, he cited about 170 authors, compared to about 510 in the seven years to 1987. Cooper and Puxty [1996,

p. 306] referred to the “proliferation” in the number of histories, historians, and ideological frameworks. In any discipline, new knowledge is largely incremental to the knowledge base and beliefs of the researcher. Looking at causation, interpreting the evidence will usually take place against a model that is dependent upon the researcher’s objectives and background. Diversity in accounting history is therefore inevitable, and it is fruitless for individual schools to claim preeminence for their own point-of-view. Moreover, the large cluster of articles in the 1990s reflects the increased opportunities for publication arising through diversity. From a pragmatic viewpoint, it is not in the interests of accounting academics to close down particular lines of inquiry. Indeed, conflicting worldviews allow accounting historians to examine or reexamine issues from different angles and to draw contrasts, either in partnership or in opposition [e.g., Tyson, 1992; Fleischman et al., 1995; Hoskin and Macve, 1996].

Third, research directions in accounting history, as reflected by Table 1, are not divorced from trends in accounting theory. The idea of accounting progressing through time towards an ideal state is consistent with a normative-deductive approach to accounting theory. If Mouck [1995, pp. 55, 60] is correct that this type of study peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the “unprecedented concern” in U.S. business schools at the time over the lack of scientific theory in management education, its subsequent decline has coincided with the overt rejection of the Darwinian model by most accounting historians. In 1975, Johnson [1975, p. 449] wrote about the “evolution of accounting procedures in large corporations” as an impetus to national economic growth, whereas by 1986, he was referring to the possibilities offered by the “new” accounting history that was by then challenging the evolutionary view [Johnson, 1986, pp. 74-75]. In 1981, Parker [p. 281] defended the notion of evolution on the grounds that “no accounting historian has discerned revolutions in accounting practice,” but all subsequent entries in Table 1 tend to regard that idea as *passé*. This is not to say that the evolutionary model in accounting history is as defunct as the table suggests since the Foucauldian focus on discontinuities in management accounting history has been paralleled by a search for continuities between the modern world and the past by their critics [e.g.; Edwards et al., 1995, pp. 34-35]. Moreover, discontinuity and evolution need not preclude each other. In a true Darwinian sense, evolution does not imply progressive improvement,

but the adaptation of species to suit their environment best. There will be extinctions and new starts along the way as the environment changes, as well as continuity and development. The main evolutionary question in accounting, then, concerns the way accounting has interacted with the environment (i.e.; social, political, economic, calculable, etc. contexts) in which it has operated at particular points in time and space, which is relevant to Marxists, economic rationalists, and Foucauldians alike. Has the interaction between accounting and its contexts been dysfunctional, congruous, or synergetic? Evidence of congruity/synergy would support the idea that accounting evolves. An example might be the growth of power systems in U.S. society from around 1800 in response to "the rise and rise of sustained cognitive growth" as the use of writing, examination, and numerical grading spread [Hoskin et al., 1997, p. 3].

Returning to the theme that developments in accounting theory and historiography are linked, the best example is shown by the post-1980 references in Table 1 to "critical" accounting history, which reflect the current vogue in "critical" or social-based accounting research. As Funnell [1996, p. 38] observed:

Central to much of the critical accounting research which has sought to question the legitimacy of existing institutions, distributions of power and the role of accounting in sustaining and perpetuating dominant capitalist forms of discourse has been an emphasis on history.

The number of references to critical studies in the table is a measure of the impetus that critical accounting research has given to accounting history in recent years.

Finally, Table 1 shows that the debate over research aims has moved from looking at what we do and why we do it, to what we ought to be doing. Accounting historiography has become more schematic in the process. The early articles cited in the table followed in the wake of the American Accounting Association's (AAA) [1970] report on accounting history by defining the scope and utility of the discipline. Goldberg [1974] developed the AAA Committee's arguments concerning the benefits to be derived from accounting history [pp. 406-408] and suggested the interrelationship between accounting practice and thought as a worthwhile field of study [pp. 409-410]. Johnson [1975, p. 444] supported the AAA's contention that accounting history would lead to a better understanding of economic history, focusing on the contribution that accountants

could make by studying the development of organizational methods in large corporations. By 1977, however, Baladouni [1977, pp. 59-67] was developing more sophisticated cultural, technological, and social frameworks, which he hoped would provide a "methodological backbone" to facilitate empirical and theoretical research in accounting history. The range of classifications in the table shows that from then on methodological issues have assumed a greater significance as the hitherto dominant "rule of economics" [Funnell, 1996, p. 39] has come under increasing challenge from social theorists. The economists have responded by defending their position. By questioning the nature of accounting history under the stimulus of "critical" scholarship, there has been a tendency to theorize it, which has culminated in the paradigmization of cause and effect along fairly rigid lines of demarcation.

Most of the authors cited in Table 1 are active historians at a field-level, and there is no reason to suppose that the fieldwork of authors in general has not been affected either offensively or defensively by these historiographical trends. Witness the call in Fleischman et al. [1996a, p. 332] for an eclecticism that has been backed by collaborative ventures or Tyson's [1998, p. 224] rebuttal of Foucauldian terminology. Proof, however, would entail reviewing all the accounting history studies now being published over a series of years. Anderson [1998] cited some 280 for 1995-1996 alone. It would be insufficient just to review the articles appearing in the mainstream accounting history journals, as these are now in a minority. Out of the total of 280, only about 60 were published in *Accounting Historians Journal*; *Accounting, Business and Financial History*; and *Accounting History*. Furthermore, to concentrate on a narrow band of articles would be especially futile if journal titles act as "Baudrillardian signs," possessing value and meaning in themselves [Cooper and Puxty, 1996, p. 292], and by implication, tend to attract articles of the same type.

CAUSALITY

Whitley [1988] examined the role of scientific models in accounting theory and drew a distinction between those derived from natural sciences and those based on the social, both of which he found present. The essence of a good, natural-scientific theory is that it both accurately describes a large class of observations on the basis of a model containing only a few arbitrary elements, and that it makes definite predictions about

the results of future observations [Hawking, 1988, p. 9]. This type of model has been used by positivist accounting researchers to explain and predict the workings of financial markets, and has been extended into the behavioral field by "positive accounting theory" [Whitley, 1988, pp. 632-634]. Essentially economic-based, such studies derive from the same natural-scientific root that underpinned the "normative apriorist" movement of the 1960s and early 1970s [Whitley, 1986, pp. 171-172; Mouck, 1995, p. 64]. Social models, on the other hand, are more value-laden because of their need for descriptions and terms that have "positive or negative connotations, both in the scientists' own culture and in the one being analyzed," and are of more limited applicability because of variations in cultural norms [Whitley, 1988, pp. 637-638]. However, this difference has not prevented social researchers from sharing the natural scientist's aim of using events to establish causal relations that can be generalized [McClelland, 1975, p. 86; Fleischman et al., 1996b, p. 63]. Haddock [1980, p. 150] described how "the claim that history should approximate a social science adhering closely to the methods of the natural sciences" first "attained the status of an orthodoxy" in the mid-19th century, and how it has continued to be "a central and contentious issue." According to Stone [1981], "the climatic years of the conversion of historians to an interest in the social sciences" were the late 1960s [p. 15], although he warned of the "growing mood of skepticism abroad about the value to historians of much of the newest and most extreme social science methodology" [p. 43]. The increased theoretical bent of accounting history since the 1980s grounds it firmly in that tradition.

The focus of the social scientist is on the present [Fleischman et al., 1996b, p. 63]. Knowledge of the past is not relevant for its own sake, but because it helps to illuminate the present and feeds into current issues. Such an opinion would be shared by many general historians [Evans, 1997, p. 61], but with accounting historians there is also the need to justify oneself in the accounting discipline where historical perspectives do not have a mature tradition. Indeed, the need for validity could explain the current emphasis on theoretical studies, as the term "atheoretical" has tended to become derisory in accounting history literature. Arguably, the postmodernist view that the past is essentially unknowable will never gain serious ground in accounting history, as this would render the discipline redundant to accounting researchers. For the same reason, historical studies which view the past as an object in itself

tend to be dismissed as “antiquarianism.” Accounting practice is regarded as a dynamic process, devised in historical situations. A study of the practice in relation to the situations enables one to question the manner in which the circumstances have changed and to assess the implications for modern practice [Whitley, 1988, p. 640; Edwards, 1989, p. 5]. Proponents of this view argue that we can learn from the past and see history as being capable of supporting contemporary research into policy making and standard setting, for example [Previts et al., 1990, p. 3].

Some accounting historians go one step further and would like to be able to predict the future. Evans [1997, pp. 53-62] traced this idea back to the 1860s, but expressed severe misgivings about history’s predictive ability. Not many accounting historians have attempted to predict the future [Parker, 1981, p. 284], but various statements of intent by journal editors have suggested it as a desirable goal. Flesher and Samson [1990, p. 3] wrote that those studies which offered “the possibility for predicting or influencing future events” would be the ones that stood the best chances of publication. Whilst stopping short of advocating “predictions,” Carnegie [1996, p. 5] did refer to the “considerable potential” that critical and interpretive research has for providing “insights into accounting’s present and future.” The stated objectives of papers that are published in *Accounting, Business and Financial History* include helping to predict possible future developments. Are such predictions possible? Goldberg [1974, pp. 408-409] and Baxter [1981, p. 5] argued they are not. Other writers have sounded a cautionary note [Edwards, 1989, p. 6]. Perhaps the answer depends on whether one takes a typical historical or typical social-scientific perspective, the latter being the more deterministic of the two [Mills, 1993, p. 802; Fleischman et al., 1996b, p. 64]. Theoretical histories derive useful insights by making predictions about past relationships, and it will be interesting to see whether the current trend towards theoretical history results in more predictions of future ones.

One of the main difficulties of causal theories of human behavior is that they do not acknowledge freewill or personality as a potential source of forecast error. This charge has been countered on the grounds that causal theories predict only the choices dictated by human dispositions rather than the resultant outcomes [McClelland, 1975, p. 71]. The distinction is a fine one, however, as such theories tend to assume a reduction in the number of acceptable choices, given similar dispositions

exposed to similar stimuli [McClelland, 1975, p. 86]. Thus, "counterfactual" analysis changes the stimuli to predict what would have happened if historical circumstances had been different [McCloskey, 1987, p. 16]. Accident is another source of forecast error not recognized by historical predictions. Evans [1997, pp. 129-138] identified accident as a key factor in "the study of causes." Wars provide many examples where accident and personality have rendered the course of events unpredictable. For instance, the Battle of Britain was lost by Germany as a result of the accidental bombing of civilians in London on August 23, 1940, which prompted retaliatory raids on Berlin, and diverted the war away from British airfields towards British cities [Shirer, 1964, pp. 931-934]. Accounting itself is not immune from these unpredictable catalysts, witness the lasting impact of Nazi economic planning on French financial reporting [Standish, 1990, p. 350]. Walton [1995, p. 8] commented on the important part that wars have played in generating accounting change, and Nobes and Parker [1995, pp. 19-20] listed accident as one of seven key determinants of the nature of accounting in any particular country. What would have been the effects on future accounting practice had the Battle of Britain resulted in the German occupation of Great Britain? What shape would accounting have taken had not the Moslem advance into western Europe been halted at Tours in 732, given the importance of both Frankish rulers and the Roman Christian Church to its subsequent development [Oldroyd, 1997, pp. 18-22]? What effect did the unexpected collapse of Polly Peck International plc have on the regulation of U.K. financial reporting in the 1990s? Arguably, it led to more restrictive practice by U.K. standard setters in an attempt to restore confidence in the accounting profession [Oldroyd, 1994, p. 37]. What has been the influence of particular individuals on the development of a new profession/theoretical discipline? The current interest in biographical studies in accounting history literature suggests that it has been great. The "crucial discontinuity" in Hoskin and Macve's [1988, p. 46] Foucauldian thesis concerning the development of modern "managerialism" in the U.S. depended on the meticulous nature of Sylvanus Thayer.

Accident and personality impact primarily on events rather than systems. Accounting has been described as a social system [Lee, 1990, p. 75]. Such a view underplays the significance of particular happenings. Eventually one ends up at the same place through deterministic forces which govern the interaction of humanity with itself and the environment. Hoskin and

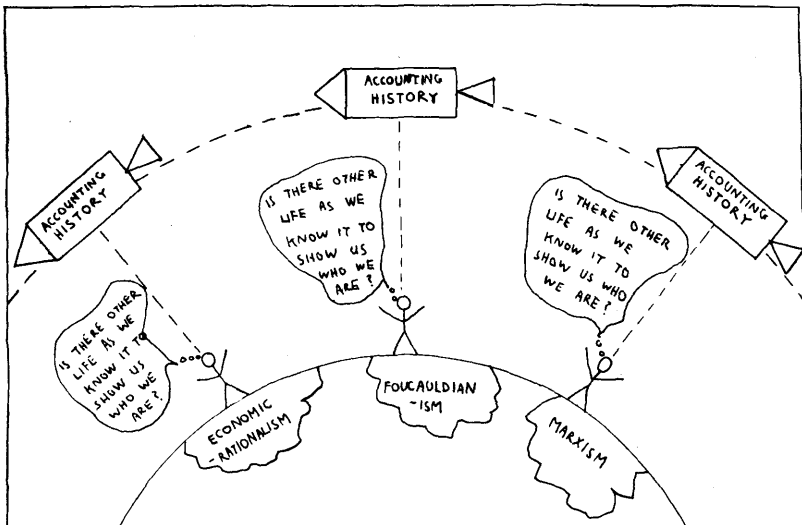
Macve [1988, p. 66] spoke of the demise of the "memorable man" under the welling-up of disciplinary knowledge within society. However, any systematic view of the world of accounting must take inertia into account. Lee [1990, p. 97] described inertia as "the self-referential and recursive nature of accounting," an important characteristic that can be overcome by events which are not always susceptible to prediction. Accounting inertia is both the reluctance to adopt new practices and ideas and the corresponding hesitancy to discard old ones. The inclination to follow what has been done before imbues past practice with its own momentum. Fligstein [1990, p. 9] observed the same phenomenon in relation to business organizations. He found that organizations tend not to change until they are faced with a crisis. Arguably, inertia in accounting has increased as accounting has become embedded in the institutional, legal, and regulatory framework. Examples of inertia might include the delay in the adoption of double-entry bookkeeping in industrial accounting or the persistence of Victorian corporate style reporting to shareholders. Accounting legislation drafted by the European Community has displayed a tendency to adapt old rules. The same has been apparent in Eastern Europe following the demise of the U.S.S.R [Walton, 1995, p. 3]. In short, there are many models that are possible to explain accounting activities beyond those that have been articulated already. By focusing on the resistors/catalysts of change, inertia could provide as complete a model as any other except that predictions would be tenable only in the indeterminate short-term where the level of forecast error is reduced. Accounting history would assume a central importance as a catalyst of change through its role in questioning the appropriateness today of "time-honoured concepts and ideas" [Edwards, 1989, p. 6].

POSITIONING

Causal theories of accounting behavior suffer from the anthropic fallacy of historical reasoning, which uses the past to justify the historian's view of the present, thereby placing him/her at the center of the historical universe. The anthropic principle in physics states that we see the universe the way it is because if it were different, we would not be here to see it [Hawking, 1988, p. 183]. At one level, any theory of the universe must include the evidence of humanity's existence. At another, humanity is placed at the center of the universe because the

nature of the cosmos is contingent on our ability to witness it. There may be other universes or regions of the same universe obeying different laws, but if there are no observable consequences, they can afford to be ignored [Hawking, 1988, p. 125]. From an historical perspective, our understanding of the past is contingent on our location in the present, and history is useful to us because it helps identify and explain who we are. The tendency to place ourselves at the center of history accounts for the disparate nature of the historical universe. Children are taught their own history at school. The recent debate over the establishment of a national history curriculum in British schools emphasized the keen interest of government that British children should learn the important “landmarks” in British history. Protestant schools in Northern Ireland learn British history and Catholic schools Irish. Ultimately, accounting history exists as a distinct region of the historical universe because of the existence of the accounting profession. As Funnell [1996, p. 39] observed, the problem is that the academic community is uncertain whereabouts in the present accounting is located, at the heart of economic or social and political theory, and so the past is being used by accounting researchers to jostle for position and to justify their own perceptions of where we stand (Figure 1). Accounting history is useful to researchers as a medium for obtaining evidence to support particular worldviews.

FIGURE 1
The Anthropoc Fallacy



If history in general is prone to the fallacy of taking one's present position back into the past in order to find material to justify it, the flaw is accentuated in theoretical histories. This was observed by Merino and Mayper [1993, p. 245], who said that the danger of imposing current beliefs on the past "increases exponentially when researchers use a theoretical framework." The efficacy of causal theories depends on their ability to predict the results of future observations. The theoretical historian, therefore, comes to a problem having already predicted what the outcome will be (in this respect history becomes intrinsically uncritical) and looks for supporting evidence. Bryer [1987, p. 3] unwittingly summarized this view. Reviewing a paper on what he described as "the final stages of the transition from feudalism to investor capital," he wrote:

If we can agree this [that there is a fundamental difference between the feudal and capitalist modes of production], then we have a conceptual and an historical basis for understanding the lords' 'ways of thinking', their 'aristocratic attitudes' (and platitudes), the overlap and contradiction of these notions of surplus in the aristocratic mind.

Marxism shows us how to interpret historical evidence before we have started to look. There is no suggestion of deliberate deception or that theoretical historians ignore available data or data sources. But, given the incompleteness of the historical record, together with the difficulties in accurately interpreting historical data, it is often possible to find evidence to support whatever claim. Maximizing wealth, commodifying labor, and regularizing relationships within the organization are not, after all, incompatible. In reality, there may be several reasons for a particular action, or what applies in one situation may not be valid in another, or the weighting of factors may vary between situations. An alternative, nontheoretical view of the accounting universe is that it is composed of interlocking causal relationships, which cannot necessarily be subsumed within unifying theories (Figure 2).

into generalizations and generalizations into theory. Causal theories are undermined by the unpredictable catalysts of accident and personality which impinge on accounting inertia. It follows that predictions can only be tenable in the indeterminate short-term where the level of forecast error is reduced. Furthermore, causal theories suffer from the anthropic fallacy of historical reasoning, which uses the past to justify the historian's view of the present, thereby placing him/her at the center of the historical universe. The difficulty with accounting is that it is uncertain whether it is located at the center of economic or social and political theory, and so accounting theorists are using the past to jostle for position. An alternative, nontheoretical view has been proposed in which it is accepted that the best that can be achieved in history are hypotheses whose intrinsic limitations are recognized.

Are there any implications for future research? First, theoretical history is fine and can yield useful insights, providing its limitations are recognized. Essentially, the article is a plea for more modest claims to be made on behalf of theoretical history. History is a multicellular creature, and the essence of historical inquiry lies in recognizing there are other points of view. It is not suggested that all views "are equally valid," or that it is impossible to resolve differences through "diligent search of the available evidence" [Fleischman and Parker, 1997, p. 218]. But uncertainty will remain. Second, the limitations of causal theories reinforce the need for more empirical studies to get as close as possible to the individual circumstances in which accounts were produced, the uses to which they were put, and the full range of participants involved. Despite the increased risks of belief transference, many theoretical historians use archival data to test their predictions. There are also those archivists, however, who through attempting "to stand apart from the paradigmatic debates" are in danger of becoming marginalized [Fleischman and Tyson, 1997, p. 102], and it is their work particularly that the article supports. Finally, using the past to cross-reference our position in the present fulfills a psychological need, which explains why all societies produce histories, either in written form or oral tradition. The great science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov [1986, p. 59] wrote:

There never can be a man so lost as one who is lost in the vast and intricate corridors of his own lonely mind. . . . There never was a man so helpless as one who cannot remember.

The relevance of accounting history goes deeper than the utilitarian view which measures it in terms of in-feeds to modern practice. If this were all there is, the past would become less useful to us the further it were removed from the present, and one could agree with Stevelinck [1985, p. 1] that "there is little of interest to the present-day accountant in the study of primitive and obsolete accounting practices" of the ancient world. However, this view runs contrary to the historical imperative of going as far back in time as possible in the search for roots. Witness the genealogies of King David in the Bible going back to Adam and Eve or the genealogies of Anglo-Saxon kings going back to the Norse gods. Accounting history helps us to know who we are, where we came from, and how we got here [Baladouni, 1977, p. 54]. One should be careful in dismissing any historical study as antiquarianism. Furthermore, if, as this need for identity suggests, the *raison d'être* of accounting history is the existence of accountants, its future existence as an academic discipline ultimately depends on the future success of the accounting profession. If the profession were to decline, accounting historians would be returned to other types of historians, those who would remain interested in history, but only in so far as it impacted on their own place in the historical universe and their own fields of vision.

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