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New oracles from Delphi - a 'crucial experiment' for positivism in archival history

Aida Sy
Manhattan College, aida.sy1776@gmail.com

Tony Tinker
Baruch College at the City University of New York, tony.tinker@gmail.com

George M. Mickhail
University of Wollongong, gmickhail@icloud.com

Fahrettin Okcabol
Mercy College

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Abstract

Empiricism has reigned supreme as an episteme for mainstream accounting research for some 25 years. In accounting, the Empiricist doctrine has assumed various guises. Positive Accounting is one of Empiricism's generic forms. It exists both in its own right, and in various incarnations such as Market Studies, Agency Theory and Historical Archivalism (in accounting history). In the U.S, these manifestations of Empiricism emerged in the mainstream literature in response to attacks on the then Big 8 accounting firms and their corporate clients. In the 1970's, Abraham Briloff's assaults in Barrons were costing the firms and their clients millions of dollars in law suits. The Big 8 mounted a counterattack to Briloff's normative perspective by alleging such work consisted of arbitrary 'opinions' and 'value judgments'. The firms urged mainstream academe to develop an alternative to normative research, grounded in 'objective' factual (empirical) analysis – Positive Accounting Research. Archival accounting history was a byproduct of this new regime. The result has been to deflect mainstream academia from any critical mission and render it impotent in dealing with the massive audit and financial failures that today imperil the World Wide economy. Positive Accounting's continuing presence has anesthetized criticism by the Academy. This paper takes advantage of a rare opportunity to deploy a 'Crucial Experiment' to evaluate accounting's positivistic epistemic foundations. This opening allows for an in-depth review of Historical Archivalism (and therefore, by implication, its parents: Positivism and Empiricism). This paper catalogues first, how archivalist accounting history disguises its normative underpinnings, and second, explores the nature of these normative underpinnings. It reveals how archival research 'disowns' value judgments by 'Consulting an Oracle': a technique of using other-voices to camouflage opinions and normative stances. Implicit in this paper's critique of Archivalism is an alternative episteme – Post-Positivism or Constructionism – that immerses as an alternative to Archivalism. The paper concludes that the hidden agenda of Archivalism / Positivism is a politically conservative one: a form of politics aimed at preserving a status quo.

Keywords

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New Oracles from Delphi

A 'Crucial Experiment' for Positivism in Archival History

Aida Sy
Manhattan College, New York
CREFIGE - University of Paris-Dauphine
St. Andrews University, Scotland
Chercheur Invite (Visiting Researcher) University of Bordeaux IV,
Montesquieu. France
Aida.Sy@manhattan.edu

Tony Tinker
Baruch College at the City University of New York
St. Andrews University, Scotland
CREFIGE - University of Paris-Dauphine
Maybank Chair, Visiting Professor at the University of Putra, Malaysia
Chercheur Invite (Visiting Researcher) University of Bordeaux IV,
Montesquieu. France

Professor George Mickhail
University of Wollongong, Australia

Professor Fahrettin Okcabol
Mercy College, New York, USA

Contact Information for Corresponding Author:

Professor Tony Tinker
One Bernard Baruch Way, Box B:12:225
New York, NY 10010-5585,
USA
Tel: 646 312 3175, Fax: 646 312 3161
Tony.Tinker@baruch.cuny.edu

Keywords: Positivism, Post-Positivism, Archivalism, Empiricism, History.

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Empiricism has reigned supreme as an episteme for mainstream accounting research for some 25 years. In accounting, the Empiricist doctrine has assumed various guises. Positive Accounting is one of Empiricism's generic forms. It exists both in its own right, and in various incarnations such as Market Studies, Agency Theory and Historical Archivalism (in accounting history). In the U.S, these manifestations of Empiricism emerged in the mainstream literature in response to attacks on the then Big 8 accounting firms and their corporate clients. In the 1970's, Abraham Briloff's assaults in Barrons were costing the firms and their clients millions of dollars in law suits. The Big 8 mounted a counterattack to Briloff's normative perspective by alleging such work consisted of arbitrary 'opinions' and 'value judgments'. The firms urged mainstream academe to develop an alternative to normative research, grounded in 'objective' factual (empirical) analysis -- Positive Accounting Research. Archival accounting history was a byproduct of this new regime. The result has been to deflect mainstream academia from any critical mission and render it impotent in dealing with the massive audit and financial failures that today imperil the World Wide economy. Positive Accounting's continuing presence has anesthetized criticism by the Academy. This paper takes advantage of a rare opportunity to deploy a 'Crucial Experiment' to evaluate accounting's positivistic epistemic foundations. This opening allows for an in-depth review of Historical Archivalism (and therefore, by implication, its parents: Positivism and Empiricism). This paper catalogues first, how archivalist accounting history disguises its normative underpinnings, and second, explores the nature of these normative underpinnings. It reveals how archival research 'disowns' value judgments by 'Consulting an Oracle': a technique of using other-voices to

camouflage opinions and normative stances. Implicit in this paper's critique of Archivalism is an alternative episteme -- Post-Positivism or Constructionism -- that immerges as an alternative to Archivalism. The paper concludes that the hidden agenda of Archivalism / Positivism is a politically conservative one: a form of politics aimed at preserving a status quo.

Archival Activism and the Poverty of Empiricism

1. METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The notion of crucial experiments ('experimentum crucis') was first muted in the seventeenth century in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, as "*instantia crucis*". Bacon used this method for deciding which of two competing theories of tidal movement were valid (Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970). Galileo deployed the same method in adjudicating between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican theories of planetary movement (Kuhn, 1962, 1970). In the 20th century, a much celebrated 'experimentum crucis' expedition, led by Arthur Eddington to Principe Island in Africa in 1919, tested Newton's versus Einstein's theories of gravitation. Eddington found that Einstein's General Theory of Relativity more accurately predicted the positions of stars around the Sun during a solar eclipse.

This paper attempts to emulate a 'crucial experiment', however it is tempered by the subsequent philosophical literature as to the feasibility of such experiments (Ravetz, 1973, Allen, 1975, Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970). Informed by this literature, this paper uses a combination of empirical and argumentative material for adjudicating the validity of the truth-claims of two competing theoretical systems. The two theoretical systems in contention in this paper are Positivist Archivalism (sometimes represented as Historical Archivalism or Empiricism) and Post-Positivism (or Constructionist, or Post-Kuhnian analysis).¹ Each represents a competing approach to establishing theoretical and empirical truth. At the risk of oversimplification, they differ in that Positivist Archivalism asserts that facts and evidence alone are determinate in establishing the validity of a

¹ To avoid repetition and cluttering the text with a lists, this paper will attempt to limit the presentation to a single proxies such as "Positivism", "Post-Positivism" (and "Archivalism)" and minimize the use of Empiricism, Constructionism, Post-Kuhnianism and Historical Archivalism.

theory², whereas for Post-Positivism, 'truth' is historical -- relative to time and place. Thus while Positivistic Archivalism seek universal truths, Post-Positivism contends that what was true in the times of, say, Socrates or Keynes, may no longer be true today (Allen, 1975).³ Positivist Archivalism seeks an invariant, absolute, yardstick of truth that pertains throughout time and space. Post-Positivism, in contrast, regards truth as changeable -- a socio-historical artifact that is socially manufactured.

The classic tournament between these two philosophical systems is documented in an engagement between Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn, Feyebend and others in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970) and subsequently between Popper and Adorno in Frisby (1976). Modern Post-Positivistic Philosophy is an outgrowth of these debates; it is sometimes termed Post-Kuhnian to denote the importance of Kuhn in establishing the turning-point of the primacy of History over Philosophy-- the triumph of historical truth over philosophical or Absolute truth.

These issues are explicated in four sections of this paper: the first section includes this Methodological Overview and an introductory discussion entitled, "The Rise of Positivism in Accounting". This passage traces the historical roots of Positivism and Positivist Archivalism in accounting. The second and third sections offer an empirical and then a theory-based Post-Positivist critique of Positivist Archivalism. These sections draw on an important paper by Tyson and Oldroyd (2007) that provides a very thorough presentation of the case supporting Positivistic Archivalism. This juxtaposition of Tyson and Oldroyd's Positivist Archivalism with a Post-Positivist perspective is our best approximation to

² Accounting researchers have devoted reams of paper to attempting to define complex terms like "income", "wealth", "expense" and "executive compensation". The same complexity applies to philosophical terms like "positivism", "empiricism", "normative" and even "archivalism". Rather than turn this paper into a long etymological quest, it follows the convention of referring readers to references that define terms like Empiricism, Positivism and Archivalism (c.f, Caldwell, 1982A, 1982B; Jones, 1972).

³ Keynesian fiscal policy may be said to be 'true' in its somewhat successful applications in Post-WW11. But by 2009, the opening of national economies through trade dilutes the impact of a national fiscal stimulus. In this specific sense, Keynesian is now 'dead' or untrue in a historical sense (Allen, 1975, Held, 1980).

a 'crucial experiment'. The final Implications section reviews the results of the previous analysis.

The Rise of Positivism in Accounting

Positivism has dominated mainstream accounting for some 25 years. Positivism, in its various forms, began to dethrone normative accounting research in the mid-nineteen seventies. Even though definitive critiques of Positivism have since been published (Hopwood, 2007A, 2007B) Positivism still reigns supreme in the mainstream literature, as evidenced, for instance, my membership-numbers of the Financial Reporting Section of the American Accounting Association, and its counterparts in the UK, Canada, and Australia. These membership numbers dwarf those of other sections. Doctoral programs -- that reproduce the faculty-base in North America -- are staffed, overwhelmingly, with financial markets faculty who espouse positivistic research. Notwithstanding withering intellectual critiques of Positivism, this research program remains firmly entrenched.

The reason for Positivism's resilience is that 'truth' is no longer settled by intellectual debates, but rather by the influence of commerce. As early as 1847, Marx noted that, by 1830 intellectual tournaments had been replaced by prizefighting -- that powerful economic interests determined which doctrines prevailed. However even before the precarious intellectual ferment of Marx's 17th and 18th Century England, commercial and economic forces often held sway. Truths volunteered by Socrates, Copernicus, Galileo and Hegel, were often extracted under duress (Stone, 1989; Benn, 1969). Ideas rarely 'faithfully represented' social reality (Solomons, 1991, Tinker, 1991). Theorizing and understandings are inevitably partial, not least because of the conditioning commercial forces.⁴ .

⁴ Adorno argues that social world always exceeds the ability of the societies intellectual ability to comprehend it and so epistemology is always inexact (Adorno, 1973). Hegel's famous remark that 'The Owl of Minerva only ascends at dusk' echoes the same sentiment: that knowledge is always historical, and can never be present or prospective (Hegel, 1977).

In the U.S, the material foundations of normative thinking lay with Briloff's small accounting practitioners. Beginning in the 1970's, Briloff launched a series of attacks on the large accounting firms and their corporate clients (Briloff, 1972, 1981). Briloff's impact cannot be overestimated: Stanford's George Foster has shown that Briloff's articles affected stock prices and cost the Big 8's clients millions (Foster, 1987).

The normative theory of Briloff et al asserted that there were 'correct' ways of measuring and reporting expenses, revenues, assets, and liabilities, and that frequently corporate managers mis-reported these amounts. Normative reasoning and deductive reasoning -- often backed by in-depth case analysis -- was the modus operandi of normative researchers like Edwards and Bell (1961), Chambers (1966), Sterling (1970) in arriving at what "ought to" or "should" be done⁵. It was this idealistic character of normative theorising that invited the criticism of positive researchers.

The positivist counteract was spearheaded by scholars from the University of Chicago, and quickly spread to Rochester, Berkeley, Stanford, Illinois, Texas, UCLA, NYU and many followers. This movement wasn't spontaneous. The Big 8/7/6/5/4 and their corporate clients funded chairs, often named after the firm or a corporate patron. They supplied generous research grants and tied funding for faculty chairs in order to regulate academic discourse. Significantly, by the mid 1990's, more than 50% of the American Accounting Associations revenue came from sources other than membership fees (Tinker, 2001).

Initially, the positivist critique took the form of arguing that researchers need to understand "what is" and eschewed the normative trap of making value judgements (Dopuch, 1980; Nelson, 1973, Dykman et al, 1985). Positive researchers remained adamant that normative criticism, of the Brilovian

⁵ Ironically, positive and normative research shares the same theoretical orientation: income theory -- a derivative of neoclassical economic theory. Normative research differs in that it stresses that the divide between ownership and control (management) cannot be rectified by market forces.

variety, was subjective, and little more than 'paid excuses' (Watts and Zimmerman, 1979).

Attempts to shut down the normative quest were particularly opportune, as auditors were under attack for their role in several takeover and merger scandals (Barmash, 1973, Soble and Dallos, 1975). Positive Accounting offered the firms and their clients academic sanctuary from the barrage of public criticism. Positivists would argue that, given the theoretical impossibility of distinguishing between correct and incorrect accounting values, auditors were not liable for the financial debacles of the period. To deflect public outrage, positivists researchers offered market studies as a research palliative, where aggregate stock prices were tendered as the true metric of corporate performance. But this measure failed to register the real source of many financial failures and scandals -- insider trading where insiders (usually managers) preyed on outsiders by manipulating stock prices with accounting manipulations. The vast industry of positivist research continues, to this day, to sideline critical investigations of accounting frauds.

Positive research has never completely eclipsed normative criticisms because of the ongoing parade of financial and audit crises. These scandals involved massive wealth transfers between powerful sectors of the financial community. Accounting facilitated these expropriations by fictitious earnings reports that created stock price bubbles. National Student Marketing, Equity Funding, Billie So Estes, Investors Overseas Services, Reliance Insurance, ZZZZBest and Regina Vacuum Cleaner are all instances of inflating accounting income to boost stock prices. This allowed takeovers by share exchange using an overvalued share price as well as supporting handsome management compensation schemes for insiders (Barmash, 1973, Soble and Dallos, 1975).⁶ Worldcom and Enron later deployed the same tactics (Briloff, 1972; Tinker, 1985.)

⁶ These and others incidents eventually prompted congressional investigations led by senators Moss and Metcalfe. Congress discovered that the then Big 8 accounting firms

The continuous dilution of regulatory, audit and disclosure requirements, the weakening of normative accounting, and the rise of Positive Accounting, have all contributed to a litany of financial crisis. The recent practices of the big American banks (Citibank, Chase, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs) have up-scaled insider trading to a new high. In 1920-9, the predecessors of Chase and Citi (National City, and Chase) perfected insider trading by targeting single stocks under the guise of anonymous syndicates (Galbraith, 1954). By the 1990's, the modern descendents of these banks, armed with billions of dollars of pension funds, mutual funds, and unit trust monies, bubble-blown entire stock markets in Russia, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Cooper, 2008, Gowan, 2009).⁷ Bubble-blowing was then taken to the American heartland: the Dot.com bubble, the Real-Estate Bubble, the Second Mortgage Bubble, and the Credit Card Bubble (Sy and Tinker, forthcoming). The dominance of Positivism ensures that academe is neither a watchdog nor a bloodhound in preventing these meltdowns.

Positive Accounting's efforts to dilute regulatory safeguards are ubiquitous. The results have been catastrophic. KPMG's audits of New Century Financial are now the object of a \$1 billion law suit (Hughes, 2009). New Century is probably a bellwether of a new parade of audit failures--ushered-in by the sub-prime fiasco. Positive Accounting has also obstructed educational progress by preventing critical content from reaching the curriculum of doctoral students and the undergraduates placed into their custody. It is apocryphal that Professor Abraham Briloff was asked to 'stay away' from his Baruch College faculty seminars because he upset the positive accounting visitors.

Audits of the banks' internal control processes have also been compromised, even though regulatory standards were installed by Sarbanes-

controlled 95% of the audit market of Fortune 500 companies, and therefore had disproportionate control over information that was released to the capital markets (U.S. Congress, 1977a, 1976b).

⁷ Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sach's trading privileges were suspended by the Hungarian authorities in 2009. These firms were using U.S. FDIC insured deposits to engage in bubble-speculation involving that countries currency.

Oxley (SOX) as recently as 2002. SOX requires management to certify the functionality of internal controls and auditors are mandated to certify management compliance.⁸ Evidence of sub-prime lending practices indicates a complete breakdown in compliance; even though the SEC and PCAOB are empowered to apply penalties on auditors and management.⁹

The empiricist episteme underpinnings of Positive Accounting -- with its focus on facts and data at the expense of social values -- stands in stark contrast to a Post-Positivist philosophy. The latter denies the possibility of transcendental facts; facts are always situated by values and are the product of prevailing social beliefs and ideology. A succinct account of the social specificity of Post-Positivist truth is given by Vic Allen:

. . . the ideas of Edmond Burke came in response to the challenge for forces for democratization;
Adam Smith's thought constituted an important theoretical justification of laissez-faire;
Marxism was an attempt to provide an explanation of the more disturbing consequences of capitalism; marginal analysis in economics was a counterblast to Marxism; Weber's bureaucratic theory was a rationalization and therefore a theoretical justification of the contradictions of large-scale German monopolies operating within an environment of laissez-faire ideology;
Keynesian economics was an intellectual and pragmatic response to the crisis of mass unemployment and the inability of classical economics to locate the cause (Allen, 1975, p.72).

⁸ Many of these financial institutions have FDIC insured deposits. By engaging in speculative activity (investment banking) they expose the public to the risk of default (Cooper, 2008).

⁹ The marginalization of normative research is the latest episode in a 50 year struggle to roll-back state regulation in favour of free market regulation. As a response to the speculative excesses of the 1920-30's, Congress passed the 1933-4 Securities Acts that mandated the form and content of prospectuses and financial reports, and directed that auditing be conducted by independent CPA's. The SEC was originally charged with responsibility to set accounting standards, but lobbying by the accounting industry and stock exchanges ensured that the SEC was never properly funded. As a result, the SEC was forced to hand-over accounting standard-setting to the accounting industry (who to this day are still paid by the entities they are charged to audit).

The case in favor of Positive Accounting and its derivative -- Historical Archivalism -- is ably presented by Tyson and Oldroyd (2007). This paper draws on Tyson and Oldroyd's work to present and test the episteme of Archivalism. It seeks to discern the underlying aims of archival history by showing how it camouflages its normative and political agenda. We show how Archivalism distances itself from expressing its own value judgments and opinions by 'Consulting an Oracle' (using the voices of others to speak on its own behalf).

2. VALUE-FREE ARCHIVALISM

Tyson and Oldroyd (2007) provides a full-dress defense of Archivalism against its critics (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, Sy and Tinker, 2005). To bolster the case for a fact-based, value-free archivalism, Tyson and Oldroyd undertook a study of 176 articles that appeared in three peer-reviewed journals. They deduce, from preliminary observations that historians are not qualified to offer policy advice or recommendations:

“...that accounting historians ... [do not]... have the authority and are they well situated to address problems in practice and theory today. That undertaking is better left to social activists, contemporary critics, an accounting regulators.... historians should continue to examine, illuminate, and interpret the past” (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p.184).

This argument in favor of political neutrality carries with it a corollary of preserving the status quo. To stand apart from the political fray is to defer to the extant institutional, political, social, and intellectual order. However, to understand the grounds by which Tyson and Oldroyd arrive this conclusions, and the extent to which it is possible to sustain this position, it is necessary to scrutinize more closely their empirical study.

Tyson and Oldroyd's study involves making five initial methodological choices: First, the choice of a data-set in the form of three journals; second, the selection (and the exclusion) of articles from those journals; third, the selection of a five-year window for framing the articles

studied; fourth, the limitation to examining abstracts-only and finally, the formulation of the categories to which the articles were consigned. We examine each in turn.

Sample-Selection

The three journals that formed the empirical base are “The Accounting Historians Journal”, “Accounting History”, and “Accounting Business & Financial History”. This first step is not just an empirical act; it involves a choice that itself must invoke a criterion by which some journals have been included, and others are excluded. Missing, for instance, are non-journal data from major conferences (celebrating for instance, Pacioli (1984), Littleton (1933), Yamey (1964) and Sombart (Yamey, 1964) seminal books and biographies, and historical works. The journals that are missing include Accounting, Organizations and Society, ABACUS, Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal etc.¹⁰ Are the hypotheses of the study intended to demonstrate the apolitical character of accounting history? Are these hypotheses adequately tested by excluding such a mass of authoritative material?

A sequence of methodological decisions were made in the Tyson and Oldroyd study, but in each case, the process of choice is not explained. By what criterion was a five year limit on papers studies determined? Why five years? Similar concerns are prompted by the decision to eliminate articles on “banking, insurance, valuation, and other aspects of business history that are, IN OUR VIEW [authors’ emphasis] only tangentially related to business history” (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p.184). To state that the exclusion is appropriate 'in our view' only begs the question as to, 'What was the rationale to support the view?' The authors

¹⁰ There is a “commonsense reasonableness” to these five choices, however commonsense alone is a poor foundation for adjudicating truth. "Commonsense" once supported the notion that the World was flat, that some races were inferior because of skin-color and their estrangement from Christ, that fairies inhabited the underworld and that women in the Middle-Ages who administered herbal medicine were practitioners of witchcraft.

are somewhat cognizant of their incomplete exposition of their process of choice:

“We recognize that our classification scheme is artificial and arbitrary” (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p.185)... and We recognize that other journals publish articles on accounting history, but these journals do not specialize in accounting history”. (op.cit. p.184).

The key part of the quotation is that the choice of journals was limited to those that 'specialize in accounting history'. But this begs more questions than it answers. What does 'specialization' mean? How might it be measured? Why is it relevant anyway? Isn't ABACUS a 'specialized journal? By what criterion is it excluded? Setting aside for a moment the problems with the criterion of 'specialization', why aren't other criteria considered? Why not, for instance, seek metrics of quality or size of journal readership? Why not use circulation figures? Why not only use accredited statistics? AOS and ABACUS are both ISI accredited; surely this stature merits consideration? Beyond ISI, why not use Google downloads or government rating exercises? Perhaps the stature of a journal's publisher should be considered?¹¹ None of these options are intended as recommendations for the research. The point is that choices are made in virtually all archival studies, and these choices must invoke a value criterion. It is never possible to resolve choices simply by struggling with the facts. Facts must always be interpreted.

It is important to decipher the manner in which archivalists 'smuggle-in' value judgments into research. In this study, methodological choices are simply parachuted into the empirics in an arbitrary manner. Opinion is allowed to masquerade as fact. Other options are never discussed. To do so would force the author's to admit that they were engaged in a process of choice, and that they were invoking their own values, their own norms and

¹¹ Indeed, in terms of the criterion of a journal's audience-reach, one of the journals included in the Tyson and Ackroyd pantheon -- “The Accounting Historians Journal”--is not even available on-line.

activism. If preferences are 'owned', then it would be possible to evaluate the adequacy of choices; and identify biases -- however unintended. Restricting sampling in seemingly arbitrary ways may -- perhaps inadvertently -- generate the results one is seeking. To re-iterate, the concern here is not with the politics implicit in archival research, but to examine its internal contradictions and the manner in which they are sustained. For, consider the assertion:

“...historians simply want to understand what happened in the past, why things happened as they did... seek to understand the past for its own stake” (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p.181, p.184)

On the face of it, this is a seemingly unpretentious, innocent claim of modesty for archival research. It is a promise to stick within the limits of the facts and avoid politics and value- judgments. No doubt, many archival researchers honestly believe that this is what they practice. However, 'motives', 'beliefs' and 'intent' are never sufficient, and can never be put beyond critical examination. As the previous passages show, archival research does not escape value-judgments. As the saying goes, 'The road to Hell is paved with good intentions'.

Data Classification, Interpretation and implications of the Empirical Analysis

For data classification and interpretation, this archival study offers the following:

“...we reviewed the abstracts of 176 articles... and categorized them according to five ‘criteria’ (sic) -- topic area(s), methodology, time focus, geographic focus, and eclecticism” (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p.184).

The authors present five categories for classifying the abstracts of the papers examined: these topic (areas) are "Methodology", "Time Focus", "Geographical Focus", and Eclecticism". The process for 'birthing' the

categories was essentially one of induction. By scrutinizing the data, the five categories emerged.

It is probably beyond dispute that this process was essentially subjective. There was no objective set of categories out-there, waiting to be discovered. Different researchers are likely to 'bring-home' different categorizations. In that sense, the process must be subjective. Subjectivity is not, in-and-of-itself, a death-blow to a research study. However, research is a collective enterprise in that researchers draw on past literature, and seek to add to a collective understanding. Studies need to be capable of being replicated, and therefore inter-subjective (Blalock, 1971).

Inter-subjectivity can be established by employing a variety of methodological precautions. Unfortunately, in arriving at the five categories in this study, none of the usual safeguards -- to preserve the internal and external validity of the data -- were employed. For instance, to protect against mere 'subjectivity', and to permit the replication of the study by others, two or more independent researchers should have separately process the same data set, producing their own categories and their own data assignments to their categories (Bunge, 1964; Blalock, 1971). The results from these independent efforts should then have been compared using qualitative correlation tests, to gauge the degree of agreement / disagreement. High correlations would provide some assurance as to the robustness of the results across different researchers and subjects. These methodological safeguards are appropriate because the production of social, scientific knowledge is a public enterprise that should allow researchers to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors to add to the results. Without such precautions, the reliability and validity of any results must be put in doubt.

The authors of the archival effort seemed aware of these concerns. They admit to the "difficult and subjective aspect of our rubric", yet notwithstanding, there was no attempt to erect an inter-subjective firewall. To the contrary:

'...We revised the final breakdown through dialogue with the other author ... we chose to place the article (sic) in a second or even third category as near as need.... [Because] ...creating time boundaries [for articles] between periods was problematic...one of the authors reviewed each abstract, made the assignment, and consulted with the other author to resolve uncertainties" ((Tyson and Oldryod, 2007, p185).

In short, rather than use independent tests and testers, the authors forced agreement between themselves, thereby compromising the external and internal validity of the study.

The next step in the archival study was to assign the abstracts to the five categories according to their content. Even with agreement on the categories, it is likely that researchers would differ in their assignment of the abstracts. It is rare in this kind of research that any empirical content would fit neatly into one category. Reality dictates that multiple memberships would be the general rule, not the exception. However, the authors -- presumably for convenience -- elected to force all abstracts into one or other category -- multiple memberships were not allowed. For an empirical study, the price of this 'convenience' is likely to be severe. Forcing Reality into boxes to which it does not entirely belong may distort the picture and therefore any inferences drawn there-from (Firstone and Chadwick, 1975; Quine, 1980A; Bunge, 1964; Blalock, 1971). ,

Methodological caution is the hallmark of good, orthodox empirical-archival research. It involves invoking a cautionary, skeptical aura.¹² Unfortunately, these sentiments were not in evidence in this archival study. Little effort was devoted to testing the validity of the core thesis of the text, or questioning the underlying precepts of the research. Quite the contrary, this study was predisposed towards affirmation. Rather than a healthy skepticism, data and methods were forced towards preordained conclusions.

¹² To this day, accountants continue to struggle to find tractable measures/ observations, corresponding to concepts of profit, expense, executive compensation, etc. Indeed, there is still no clear definition for some of these concepts.

The previous passages examined the empirical dimensions to this 'crucial experiment'. The next section examines the theoretical critique. Here, Archivalism doesn't offer any theoretical base of its own, because 'theory' takes second-place to data and evidence in the archival notion of truth. Nonetheless, archivalists have sought to rebut the post-positivist critique of Archivalism, and do so by seeking to discredit Post-Positivist philosophy.

3. THEORETICAL CRITIQUE: THE NEW ORACLES

Post-Positivism is the antithesis of Archivalism in that it treats all facts -- and thus all history -- as theoretical constituted. There are no neutral or objective positions; history is always (re) constructed from a particular perspective. Values, opinions and subjectivity predicate post-positivist research (Held, 1980; Adorno, 1973, 1979). There are no transcendental truths in this philosophy; truth is always relative to time and place (Allen, 1975, Held, 1980).

In order to critique Post-Positivism, Archivalism must overcome an internal contradiction. If opinions and value-judgments are banished from any archivalist discourse, then it must find a method of expressing a critical opinion -- a judgment -- without expressing an opinion or a judgment! Tyson and Oldroyd resolve the dilemma by drawing on secondary sources to critique the Post-Positivist (Post-Kuhnian) research (Kuhn, 1962).¹³ The practice is not dissimilar to the method used by the Ancient Greeks who traveled to Delphi to consult the Oracle when faced with major quandaries. Tyson and Oldroyd consult three oracles to mount their critique: Bryer (2006A, 2006B) Harris (1992), Laudan (1996). We

¹³ This is not the place to provide a full re-statement of the defense of Post-Kuhnian research. This is detailed in Sy and Tinker (2005). In summary, Post-Kuhnian (Post-Positivist) contends that data never 'speaks for itself' but must always be interpreted, and thus archival research constructs truth and re-present facts. Second, all quests for trans-historical truths are destined to fail. What is 'true' is always contingent on a time and place in history. Post-Kuhnian research aims to develop a notion of 'truth' that recognizes its socially relative nature and show how truth changes and therefore, how it is possible to transcend the present with a "new" standard of truth (Held, 1980).

consider the each oracle and then return to whether this practice -- of consulting an oracle -- is consistent with archivalist practice.

The New Oracles

1. *Bryer (2006A, 2006B)*

“...Kuhn’s belief that law, theory, application, and instrumentation... cannot be separated...” (Bryer, 2006, p.552).

Bryer’s criticism above of Post-Positivism is a very important one, but it requires further elucidation. When empirical evidence is collected, it always reflects on two, not one, theory. First, a theory of observation about how, for instance, an electron microscope, a telescope, or a questionnaire works. When a researcher observes the results of a questionnaire, s/he is hypothesizing that the questionnaire itself is giving results that mean what it is taken to mean (Sy and Tinker, 2005, p.52; Firestone and Chadwick, 1975, Quine, 1980B). For instance, consciously or otherwise, the researcher hypothesizes that the check-marks on the questionnaire a good-faith report. Implicitly, s/he is also hypothesizing that they are not a coffee stain, an act of sabotage by an angry respondent, or some other explanation. By accepting the results as good-faith reports, the researcher is forming, testing, and accepting a hypothesis, and rejecting a type-two explanation / hypothesis (of coffee stains, sabotage etc). S/he is always testing an observation theory.

The same evidence also tests a second hypothesis; that belonging to the theory of real interest. This theory might concern, for example, the theory as to the cause of planetary movements or to the factors creating employee loyalty. The problem is that evidence is always filtered by measuring instruments (eyes, questionnaires, electron microscopes). Thus it is impossible to know whether the results are a commentary on the validity of the measuring instrument or on the theory under examination. Bryer’s important point is that because two theories are always in play (the

extant theory and an observation theory) it is impossible to disentangle the evidence to know to which theory it applies. Does it refute/ affirm the extant theory, the measurement theory, both, or neither? Hence, for Bryer, truth can never be established unequivocally with evidence by post-positive research.

An example of the dilemma posed by Bryer (and therefore, Tyson and Oldroyd) is in Barnes (1982). Barnes notes that the planet Uranus remained 'undiscovered' for months, because the electrical impulses registering on a printout were interpreted as ink smudges. Uranus was eventually 'discovered' when researchers began to suspect the correlation of the smudges on printouts over time. The problem lay in the inseparability of the observation theory (reading the printout) and the theory of astronomy. While there are ways of minimizing measuring instrument errors, they are difficult to eradicate, and it is impossible disentangle empirical results of the observation theory and extant theory. Bryer (Tyson and Oldroyd) are on strong grounds in their case against Post-Positivism's reliance on evidence.

Ironically, Tyson and Oldroyd's own siren may augur more trouble for the Archivalism than for its adversary: Post-Positivism. Archivalism's notion of truth is exclusively evidential; it depends totally on facts. Therefore Bryer's indictment is far more lethal for Archivalism than for its Post-Positivist contender. For Post-Positivism, truth only partially relies on evidence; it also admits logical and theoretical sources for validation (Kuhn, 1970). Furthermore, archivalists frequently aspire to a much more ambitious notion of truth than post-positivists. Some archivalists believe that, just by heaping on more-and-more facts, a final truth may eventually will-out (Harris, 1992). The hurdle for truth for Post-Positivism is more modest than that of Archivalism. Post-Positivism only seeks to establish

social truth; what is true at a particular time and place in history. (Allen, 1975, Held, 1980).¹⁴

2. Harris (1992).

In a similar oracle-like consultation, Harris (1992) is summoned by Tyson and Oldroyd to offer a solution for choosing between competing theories. Harris' proposal below bears a strong resemblance to a crucial experiment. So Tyson and Oldroyd, (2007, p. 177) Notes that, "Harris ... proposes a different solution to resolve intellectual debates, one that most archival historians would readily embrace."

Harris' solution is as follows:

"In anything is going to resolve the dispute between competing theories it will be the accumulation of more data through experiments by more researchers over a longer period of time." (Harris, 1992, quoted in Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, p. 177).

Importantly, this takes Archivalism beyond a neutral description -- to a higher and much more ambitious realm --of adjudication between theories as to their relative truth. In this regard, Tyson and Oldroyd are decidedly remiss in terms of their acquaintance with relevant literature. Karl Popper was probably one of the greatest proponents of Empiricism; yet there is no examination of Popper's philosophical remonstrations in Tyson and Oldroyd (Popper, 1968, 1970). The kind of empiricism proposed by Harris (1992) is a form of confirmationism or induction. A review of Poppers' works -- beginning with the first edition (1957) of *THE LOGIC OF SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY* (1968, p.45-51) -- shows that no amount of fact-digging can prove a hypothesis (Popper, 1968). Popper's alternative -- that disproof or refutation of theories -- is the only tenable episteme, rebuts the

¹⁴ One further irony is that the more modest position of post-positivists put them closer to that arch-empiricist, Karl Popper, than archivalists. Popper, one of the legendary advocates of empiricism, has maintained that theories can never be proved, but only refuted. His position on refutation has been subsequently weakened as a result of debates with Kuhn, Lakatos, and Adorno (Frisby, 1976, Lakatos and Musgrave 1970).

case for induction-based empiricism. Popper proposes refutation as the only tenable philosophical position.

But Popper's refutation isn't Archivalism's the Holy Grail. Popper has retreated from a strong refutation position as a result of criticisms from Lakatos, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Adorno and others (Feyerabend, 1969, 1973). These writers underscored the difficulties of refuting a theory. Their objections focus on the unclear rules of correspondence (the fuzzy relationship between theoretical terms and observational terms) the ambiguities created by the simultaneous double-testing of observation and extant theories, and the incommensurability of scientific theories. Historians also insisted that the past record of scientific change shows that science has never progressed by refutation, but by the formation and reformation of paradigms -- paradigmatic shifts. A scientific revolution / paradigm overthrow was the exception, not the rule (Feyerabend, 1969, 1973, Kuhn, 1962, 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970).

Tyson and Oldroyd cannot avoid responsibility for their citation of the opinions expressed by their anointed oracle (Harris, 1992). Whatever the quality of Harris' analysis, it is important to know how and why Harris was selected. Many distinguished defenders of the Empiricism / Archivalism were passed over by Tyson and Oldroyd. The works of these writers would have greatly enriched the philosophical foundations of Tyson and Oldroyd's Archivalism, but their works lead to the unwelcome conclusion for Archivalism: that values -- not just facts -- guided the oracle-adoption process.

3. *Laudan (1996).*

Speaking through a new oracle (Laudan, 1996) Tyson and Oldroyd note that:

Laudan views post-positivism as, "... an intellectual failure. The argument on its behalf are dubious and question-begging. Still worse, it has sustained no positive program of research... and that it

now teeters on the brink of conceptual bankruptcy.” Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007, pp.178).

Laudan's death-sentence pronounced on Post-Positivism is delivered without evidential support. Indeed, the assessment of "Conceptual Bankruptcy" fails to square with the evidence. There are several thriving journals serving the post-positivist field: *Organisation Studies*, *Situations*, and *Social Text*. Even in accounting, the journal *Accounting, Organizations and Society* has been in the vanguard of promoting post-positivist research; notably regarding the works of Michele Foucault. A cursory scan of the accounting publications shows that post-positivist research is alive and well. Many accounting writers exemplify different variants of this research program: Pat Arnold, Stanley Aronowitz, Ed Arrington, Gerry Hanlon, Stefano Harney, Jim Haslam, Anthony Hopwood, Keith Hoskin, Sonja Galhoffer, Cheryl Lehman, Ray Loveridge, Norman MacIntosh, Richard Macve, Randy Martin, Alan McKinlay, Barbara Merino, Roland Monroe, Frank Mueller, Bertell Ollman, Vaughan Radcliffe, Michael Rosen, and Mick Rowlinson, etc.¹⁵

Laudan raises a second problem for post-positivism. Tyson and Oldroyd (2007, p.178) quoting Laudan:

"....[The incommensurability critique of Empiricism by post-archivalists] ...has been a philosophical conundrum in search of instantiation. Neither Kuhn or Feyerabend present any evidence that natural scientists on opposite sides of the theoretical fence systematically failed to understand one another, as the thesis of incommensurability requires”.

Laudan's observation is puzzling. Kuhn, Adorno, Lakatos, Masterson, and Feyerabend provide several examples of '... evidence that natural scientists on opposite sides of the theoretical fence systematically

¹⁵ This is not to assert that all these writers are in complete unanimity about everything; they do share however a skepticism about empiricism and the importance of recognizing the institutional / social production of knowledge.

failed to understand one another, as the thesis of incommensurability requires” (Adorno, et. al, 1976, Feyerabend, 1969, 1973, Frisby, 1976; Popper, 1968; Lakatos, 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970). Kuhn et. al, cite, for instance, the Catholic Church's theory, placing the Earth (and 'man') at the centre of the Universe. This theory was quite irreconcilable with Galileo's theory of planetary motion.¹⁶ The theories of Copernicus and Ptolemy drew on quite different and incommensurable explanatory systems, and therefore they both co-existed for several decades.

Scientific theories, like history, are not like mathematical theories, where it is often possible to lay one mathematical theory side-by-side against another. Two mathematical theories can be represented as a series of theorems, axioms, and / or equations. Each can then be compared with the other to identify the one with illogical premises and contradictions. Non-mathematical theories are not structured and organized with the same exactness as mathematical theories; they do not share their clarity and precision. The rules of correspondence of non-mathematical theories are often fuzzy. This is as true, not just for the natural sciences and physics, but also for social sciences like history and accounting -- the territory of Tyson, Oldroyd, and Laudan. For this reason, these theories do indeed 'systematically fail to understand one another'; they are incommensurable and this is the general case.

By the same token, Einsteinian and Newtonian theories of gravity and planetary motion remained unresolved for years because they drew on quite different rationales. Ptolemy's navigational charts remained in force for over 50 years after Copernicus announced his new system. Einstein's followers waited for decades for Arthur Eddington's opportunity to visit the South Seas to witness a rare eclipse. A 'crucial experiment' is only possible

¹⁶ Karl Popper provided a 'line of demarcation' to separate science from non-science (Popper, 1957). To qualify as a science, a theory must be refutable. This excluded religious beliefs, Marxism and History from Popper's realm of science. Philosophies such as Post-Positivism have re-admitted values into the scientific realm and in response, the Popperian exclusion of religion has been weakened. Hence, today, religious beliefs are a powerful influence in some sciences.

when two theories are sufficiently commensurable to permit testable predictions. Even then, empirical opportunities for testing the prediction may be quite rare. Such opportunities for commensurability and testing are unusual occurrences --incommensurability is the general case (Ravetz, 1973; Baritz, 1980).¹⁷

Notwithstanding questions as to the veracity of Lauden's claims, Lauden presents Tyson and Oldroyd with the same self-contradictory conundrum as that presented previously. Like Harris, Lauden work isn't a peer-reviewed publication but book from an obscure publisher. A peer-reviewed oracle might have alerted Tyson and Oldroyd to the literary oversights noted previously. Equally important: the absence of discussion as to the selection of the Lauden-Oracle perpetuates the archival fallacy of value-free analysis.

4. IMPLICATIONS

This study has grasped the rare opportunity to conduct something akin to a crucial experiment to assess the relative efficacy of Positivism / Archivalism and Post-Positivism. The former has dominated mainstream accounting research for some 25 years. The authority of Positivism in accounting has provided a mandate to Archivalism in accounting history. In this sense, Positivism has extended to accounting history its mandate of objectivity and a-politicization, and the corollaries of anti-criticism and endorsement of the status quo.

Tyson and Oldroyd provide an excellent defense of Archivalism and therefore Positivism in general. The difficulties facing these authors should not be underestimated; nor should it be forgotten that Positivism and Archivalism still reigns supreme -- these beliefs are de rigueur for mainstream accounting research. This 'unpleasant truth' for critical researchers is a reminder of the importance of repeatedly challenging

¹⁷ Karl Popper acknowledges the impossibility of "proving" a hypothesis, because it would require that sampling is always inconclusive because "proof" requires that we also sample all cases in the past, present, and future (Popper, 1968).

Positivism at every opportunity. There is a temptation for critical researchers to retreat into a self-affirming cocoon, comforted by the knowledge that they won the intellectual battle. But 'theory' is more than just an intellectual question; it is also a social product and therefore the 'World of Ideas' will never accomplish a final closure. Hence, Tyson and Oldroyd have provided an invaluable opportunity to maintain the ongoing interrogation of these social beliefs.

The framework of a crucial experiment gives this paper a singular occasion for interrogating Archivalism. Tyson and Oldroyd offer a defense of Archivalism and critique of Post-Positivism that is both theoretical and empirical. This paper provides a sympathetic rendering of Tyson and Oldroyd's arguments, and a counter-critique of the theoretical and empirical components of their case. The counter-critique shows that, although Archivalism seeks to disguise its normative underpinnings, it is unable to escape from its own value judgments. The primary tactic that archivalists deploy is to disown their value judgments by 'Consulting an Oracle' -- using the voices-of-others to promote subterranean opinions and normative stances. This paper concludes that Positivism and Archivalism can never be apolitical, neutral or value free. They always proffer a political agenda -- acknowledged or otherwise.¹⁸

¹⁸ In accounting history, the preservation of the status-quo ranges from closet-Eurocentricism to Great-Men" theories of history. These topics are not the subject of this paper, but has been discussed elsewhere (Sy and Tinker, forthcoming).

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