

Business History: State of the Art and Controversies*

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Let me start out by observing that at present business history seems to be in very good health. I haven't done precise quantitative inquiries but we all know that business history has three major journals with a global diffusion (*Business History Review*, *Business History*, and *Enterprise and Society*). Additionally, another important journal (*Economic History Review*) is increasingly inclined to accept contributions focusing on business history. Furthermore, each of Europe's major nations as well as Japan has at least one publication dedicated exclusively to this field of studies. There are also important associations such as the BHC (Business History Conference, a US-based initiative) and EBHA (the European Business History Association). In addition here in Europe there are several associations at a national level. The last international congress of economic history at Helsinki in 2006 included a good number of sessions and even more are planned for next summer's conference in Utrecht. Overall, business history seems to be one of the liveliest areas of economic history. I think that this is happening:

- because in our discipline human beings — individually or collectively— never disappear; they are always at the center of the stage
- because the enterprise— that is our major unit of analysis— can be tackled or observed under an almost infinite number of variables
- and, finally, because business history (with its capacity to often link micro and macro) gives an important contribution to understanding the evolution of national and international economic development.

In this note (which comes out of a talk I gave at a conference of Spanish business historians in Barcelona in December 2008), my comments will be

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divided into three parts. First I would like to characterize the actual phase. Then I will try to outline what seem to me to be the most promising fields of research. Finally, I will try to envision the scientific and academic alliances that await us.

1. A post-Chandlerian phase

Today what we notice is that any colleague who reflects on the state of business history invariably uses an adjective to define the present phase: “post-Chandlerian”. For some, it is just a matter of fact; since Chandler passed away almost two years ago, he no longer authors books and articles (something that he did practically until his final days). For others, instead, this is a *liberation* because for them Chandler seemed to be an obstacle to progress in the discipline.

With his adamant persistence on industrial big business as the engine of economic development, Chandler placed some scholars in a predicament. Certainly what we inherited from him is difficult to put in its proper context. Unquestionably he was the scholar who gave an academic and scientific consistency to business history. In 1997, Richard John— in his stimulating review article published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *The Visible Hand*— in the *Business History Review* half seriously wrote that, in business history circles, *BC* means “*Before Chandler*”¹. Indeed, before Chandler, business history was an isolated discipline, totally unconsidered by historians and by economists, trapped in the middle of the battle between those accusing or defending the “robber barons” and a series of soul-less company histories².

Thanks to Chandler’s methodology (with its sharp focus on the entrepreneurial actions that gave birth to big business and a wide comparison with research on hundreds of companies) it was possible to make generalizations that were indispensable reference points not only for business historians but also for scholars in other disciplines. *Strategy and Structure*³ (a comparison of companies) became almost a “bible” for students of management. *The Visible Hand*⁴ (a comparison of sectors) was almost as useful for institutional economists and lawyers interested in issues related to antitrust. *Scale and Scope*⁵ (a comparison of nations) emphasized the importance of organizational capabilities for the wealth of a nation and reassured the evolutionary economists about one of their most important concepts. Since, for Chandler, the essential task of entrepreneurs was to give birth to an extended managerial network, he was able to reconcile Weber with Schumpeter, *de facto* bringing to an end the debate started at the Center in Entrepreneurial History that

1. John (1997), p. 167.
2. Galambos (2003).
3. Chandler, Jr. (1962).
4. Chandler, Jr. (1977).
5. Chandler, Jr. (1990).

was created (as is well known) in 1949 at Harvard by Arthur Cole and the same Joseph Schumpeter.

A very important conclusion in Chandler's framework is the centrality of technology, making some sectors more "equal" than others: they are the sectors which can exploit the economies of scale and scope giving birth in this way to big business. Technology is seen as both a constraint as well as an opportunity that can't always be grasped, a statement that leaves plenty of room for historical research. All this brought about a real Chandlerian "dictatorship" that lasted for two decades (1970-1990) and, as Lou Galambos noted in a brilliant essay⁶, caused dangerous conformism (even if, personally, Alfred Chandler was anything but an arrogant academic baron!)⁷.

Probably Chandler made a wrong move with his third great work (*Scale and Scope*) which had the ambition of considering three major nations: US, UK, and Germany. The magnitude of the work made it impossible for him to have direct access to primary sources and to master all the contributions that could have been sought out. He undervalued the importance of family businesses in Europe; he failed to understand well a peculiar form of European enterprise that is the holding company; and he didn't properly consider the fact that industry has to be studied together with other sectors, especially services, to really link big business to the wealth of a nation.

These weaknesses were effectively demonstrated, for instance, in Youssef Cassis' volume *Big Business: the European Experience in the 20th Century*⁸ but, certainly, the most devastating criticism of *Scale and Scope* came from someone who had once been one of Chandler's closest pupils, Leslie Hannah. He started a systematic crusade against the thesis of *Scale and Scope* at the 1995 Business History Conference with an essay — "Business History: Theory and Comparisons" that was part of a collection of papers he subsequently edited entitled "*The American Miracle 1875-1950 and After: a view in the European Mirror*"⁹. The final segment of Hannah's campaign can probably be found in a paper he delivered in spring 2008 at a seminar at my university. Based on several examples, Hannah challenged Chandler's affirmation that the success of the US is due to its precocious rise of managerial public companies. In fact, according to Hannah, at the beginning of the 20th century there were more of these enterprises in the UK than in the US. Without mercy, Hannah defined Chandler's *Scale and Scope* story as something out of Hollywood, totally false and completely tied up with a sort of Whig deterministic ideology¹⁰.

6. Galambos (2003).

7. Amatori (2007).

8. Cassis (1997).

9. See Hannah (1995).

10. Hannah, "Hollywood History: or why (some) Americans get European business history wrong", paper presented at the ASSI-Bocconi series on business history, 4 April 2008.

These were not the only critiques made to the Chandlerian approach. Also very important were some offered by sociologists who—when analyzing big business—thought it more proper to focus on the issue of power than those of technology and markets¹¹. Just a few years ago, one of these scholars—Robert Freeland—attacked one of the sanctuaries of Chandler’s work, the story of Alfred Sloan’s General Motors. Based on apparently solid archival work, Freeland demonstrated that the multidivisional company was not a rational economic move but, instead, a political decision made by Alfred Sloan to find the most suitable mediation between an obsessive ownership and the ambitions of the managers at the head of divisions. Freeland challenged the basic Chandlerian statement according to which there is a rigid separation between a headquarters dedicated to long-term strategy and the divisions which struggled day by day with the market’s demands. De facto, the most fruitful phases for Sloan’s GM were those in which the leader involved the commanders of the divisions in the top level decisions that were typical of headquarters. In the end, the real issue for Sloan was to get as much consensus as possible—however that was possible¹².

Another heavy attack on Chandler came from historians who didn’t think that firms should be the only unit of analysis and that the issues had to be strictly related to economic performance. In this respect, very eloquent were the writings of Kenneth Lipartito and Philip Scranton in the September 2008 issue of *Enterprise and Society*, a part of which was dedicated to Alfred Chandler. Lipartito advocates the advent of a business history that emphasizes the role of the culture and of social values. In his opinion, this kind of history cannot be added to the framework of Alfred Chandler. “Culture is not one more factor in the growth of business or in the firm’s quest for profit and efficiency; it is an alternative way to think about the significance of business and why it is worth studying”¹³.

In the same issue, Scranton refers to Chandler’s work utilizing the framework of the social theorist, Zygmunt Bauman as one of “solid modernity: a part of history now coming to its close... which could be dubbed... the era of hardware or heavy modernity—the bulk-obsessed modernity, the larger the better kind of modernity, of ‘the size is power, the volume is success’ sort”¹⁴. According to Scranton, in Chandler’s vision, bigger meant more efficient and the largest corporations are an indispensable tool for that “solid modernity” that coincides with progress. But, Scranton reminds the reader, we now live in an age of “liquid modernity” in which “history is built anew, generation by generation, because the questions needing answers arise from what surrounds historians. Our surroundings are sharply different... from those in the high Chandlerian period,

11. Fligstein (2008).

12. Freeland (2001).

13. Lipartito (2008), p. 432.

14. Scranton (2008), p. 427.

perhaps from the early Fifties to the mid Seventies. After which, stagflation and deregulation among other phenomena emerged to derail a century long trajectory”¹⁵. We are looking now, according to Scranton, for new partnerships: business history has to set a new conceptual stage and has to ask new questions. Otherwise, given the very scarce interest for the obsolete Chandlerian narrative, it runs the risk of suiciding.

The same Scranton— during the 2007 edition of EBHA’s summer school in Terni, Italy—took a “walk in the woods” with Patrick Fridenson. While walking, the two scholars outlined the agenda for a business history after Chandler. They considered a series of topics which could animate a post-Chandlerian business history. Their general philosophy was then summarized in the following plan:

- (1) stop taking the US and structure/practice in the US as normal and normative;
- (2) end privileging the firm as the discipline’s core of analysis. Hence, develop an ecology of analytical foci in relation to problems differently situated;
- (3) recognize that the State is always “in”;
- (4) combat retrospective rationality, rationalization, and causality seeking;
- (5) resist the rush to the recent; and
- (6) avoid singularity of vision and the search for the next dominant paradigm¹⁶.

The critique of Chandler’s vision was finally sealed by the so-called alternative approach of Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin who accused Chandler of theologism and determinism, contesting his separation between the actors and the context, and his rigid divisions in different epochs. These scholars advocate the existence of uncertainty, mutability, and hedging strategies; the predominance of hybrid forms over pure types; the fact that the single firm is no longer the unit of analysis but has to be considered an economic governance beyond the firm; and that contingency and strategic choice are the main springs of economic change¹⁷.

But—forgive me, I am a stubborn Chandlerian¹⁸— I am not at all convinced that Chandler’s work and model should be totally abandoned. I agree with Lou Galambos when he points out that a scholar can find ways to build, broaden, and improve upon Chandler’s paradigm¹⁹. I also believe that the general Chandlerian framework (the one exposed in *Scale and Scope*) can still be useful. In this respect, I think that Whittington and Mayer are correct in their book on the European

15. *Ibidem*, p. 428.

16. Scranton, “*Enterprise and Society and the Future of Business History*”, paper presented at the ASSI-Bocconi series on business history, 9 May 2008, Milan.

17. Zeitlin (2003).

18. Amatori (1997).

19. Galambos (2008).

corporation to state that we need to distinguish between Chandlerist and Chandlerian (echoing in this way the distinction between Marxist and Marxian) meaning with this a distinction between the rigid text and the spirit of the same²⁰.

Chandler is the historian of the Second Industrial Revolution, a macro-technological impulse that requires an obliged answer by entrepreneurs, a three-pronged investment in production, distribution, and management. The first movers who made this investment consistently maintained that, in the course of the years, organizational capabilities (which are indispensable constituency for the wealth of a nation) were formed. In this framework, three variables play an essential role: markets—especially seen in their dynamicity, the relationship between business and government that Chandler sees especially as regulation of competition, and cultures which he saw as the capacity to accept the universalistic needs of large corporations.

If we take this framework and render it more flexible (for instance, if we see the relationship between business and government as something more than just antitrust action), I think that this Chandlerian model can be applied also to both Italy as well as Spain. I did that for my country, trying to demonstrate that the Italian experience was not a development “different”—based on small business and industrial districts; we tried the Chandlerian way but something went wrong after the fabulous Fifties and Sixties, the time when in Italy big was beautiful, but the continuous enlargement according to political criteria of the State-Entrepreneur and the lack of a proper institutional framework for big business brought about the so-called failed Japanese landing of the Italian economic system²¹.

2. Emerging Fields of Research

Even I am willing to admit that we now have to go beyond Chandler. In my opinion, four directions of research seem to be particularly fruitful. These include:

- the study of the N-Form;
 - the historical perspective of globalization;
 - issues related to the relationship between enterprise, society and culture;
- and, finally,
- entrepreneurship

2.1 As regards the N-Form (the network corporation), we can say that if Chandler can be considered the historian of the Second Industrial Revolution, he was not as

20. Whittington and Mayer (2000).

21. Amatori (2008).

proficient for the Third, even when his last works on hi-tech sectors are considered. The mid-Seventies brought about all kinds of changes that really put us in the heart of a Third Industrial Revolution. While the general environment presented elements of strong turbulence (oil shocks, monetary disorder), the period is also characterized by an increase of international economic exchanges in a competitive scenario ever more aggressive with a demand or style increasingly personalized. We can also add in a more educated labor force (including a more pronounced female presence) that was increasingly unwilling to put up with rigid hierarchical relationships. At the same time, a powerful push changing forms of enterprise was technological innovation which, in various branches greatly reduced the necessity for economies of scale. But, above all, the last years of the past century were characterized by exceptional progress in electronics and in telecommunications up to the rise of internet. On the one side, these technologies allowed a greater control of the workers and the productive processes. On the other side, they also permitted a pervasive diffusion of information throughout the company, rendering possible a large mobilization of resources for the design and organizational functions. In addition, they showed greater responsiveness to the market, with no precedent for timing and adherence, and an ability to adapt quickly to particular requests. In this context a company whose organizational borders are more porous seemed to come out. The general structure had a tendency to de-verticalization and to flattening the hierarchy. We find a structure in which a special emphasis was put on creativity, learning, or valuing an exchange of knowledge. The potential of the informational web to find an adequate materialization on the economic side brought about the need to translate it into an analogous network organization, an horizontal structure in which processes such as decentralization and autonomy of the various units prevailed, but also where there was active involvement of all the employees in the strategic global design so that the Chandlerian concept of organizational capabilities overcame, without reservations, the confines of management to be extended into all the various company components.

If Ford and General Motors, the giants of automobiles with their production lines and the multidivisional structures, are seen as the epitome of the age of the Second Industrial Revolution, at the beginning of the third millennium it is a producer of infrastructures for the web, Cisco Systems, which represents the model of the internet economy firm²². I don't think that such a network enterprise has yet been studied as systematically as the so-called Chandlerian firm of the Second Industrial Revolution. It's a task that the actual and the next generations of business historians will have to perform. Which are the critical points of the networks? Where is decisional power located? How permanent is this structure? Which kind of implications will the network enterprise have on industrial relations? And, in general, with politics?

22. Castells (2000).

In a fascinating paper by Richard Langlois, the author assumed that in these new conditions the “visible hand” of management would be dissolved in the “vanishing hand” of the web modular design. Confident on external capacity and substitution economies, these elements, however, are unable to hide the fact that in the contemporary economy the company remains an actor that cannot be suppressed since it maintains legal attributes—property rights, shares transferability, limited liabilities—that cannot be given up to the network while the role of management, even in more limited confines, still seems to be crucial for the design and implementation of competitive strategies in addition to the coordination and to the softening of frictions that are inevitable in relations between members of the enlarged system. As I mentioned earlier, a new generation of business historians together with experts of management will investigate and clarify these issues²³.

2.2 Globalization in an historical perspective

In the age of globalization, it seems natural that we are going to put an emphasis on studies of international business and diasporas. In addition to that, we want to know more and more about regions that are still, de facto, (from a business history perspective) uncharted territories. This is necessary to understand the so-called “great divergence” between the “West and the Rest” that we have after the industrial revolution of two centuries ago but also in order to understand the emergence of the new giants such as India and China in recent decades²⁴.

In autumn 2008 I tried to make a small contribution to this field, promoting an international colloquium on business and the Chinese Miracle from which emerged a sort of model rather different from those of Japan or the other Asiatic tigers. China, it seems, relies more on the liberation of animal spirits than on a developmental state; this is thanks to legislation that enhances progressively free initiative. Unlike other Asian countries, China is not afraid to accept multinationals. It is able to play on all the spectrum of industrial technologies and still maintain a system of state-owned enterprise, a good portion of which is organized under the coordination and surveillance of a huge public holding, SASAC, which I was surprised to find is very similar to the original Italian experience of IRI. Our colloquium was supposed to examine the past 30 years but the opening talk was an ample presentation by a business historian, Morris Bian, who talked about past and present of Chinese business history. Bian emphasized the differences between the Japanese state in the second part of the 19th century and its Chinese counterpart. For China, the counterpart of Japanese samurai were

23. Langlois (2003).

24. See, for instance, Khanna (2007).

corrupt bureaucrats who could not pilot the enormous country into the era of industrialization. Notwithstanding all of this, at the turn of the 20th century in China there were crowds of entrepreneurs, the equivalent of the Japanese *chonin* and the forerunners of the actual animal spirits. But Bian's paper also emphasized the forms of enterprise in the first part of the 20th century that even in big business were based much more on networks (even if informal networks) rather than formalized managerial hierarchies. And, finally, very interestingly Bian made us understand the resilience of state owned enterprise in China since erroneously we think that planned control was imported after 1949 from the Soviet Union. State-owned enterprise and planned economy in China date back to the nationalistic experience of the Twenties and Thirties and got an acceleration with the Sino-Japanese war²⁵.

2.3 Enterprise, Society and Culture

Another sure path of research in the next few years will be that which exams the relationship between firms and society. We must recognize that up to now most of our research has been devoted to analyzing the economic performances of business. We have not deepened very much the cultural aspects of business history nor have we done much investigation of the impact of the company on society, its relationship with the environment and with politics.

A few years ago, unsatisfied with this situation, I published a robust article of Robert Hayes on German big business and the Holocaust in the Italian business history yearbook for which I am editor because I am convinced that we cannot hide these kinds of problems²⁶. In a certain sense that goes together with some remarks made by Christopher McKenna in that same issue of the journal "Enterprise and Society" which I mentioned before with the interventions of Lipartito and Scranton. McKenna expressed regret for the fact that in the Chandlerian approach there is no space for ethics²⁷. I think that this affirmation is wrong since Chandler— even if not loudly—emphasized the positive role of big business as an ensemble of forces of production in a way that even the generation that came of age in 1968 did appreciate²⁸. But notwithstanding that, I believe that this quest for ethics in business is going to be a crowded field of research in our discipline. For instance, we have now various scholars who are starting to focus on the concept of social responsibility of the companies²⁹. These topics are going to be investigated

25. Bian (2008).

26. Hayes (2000).

27. McKenna (2008).

28. Amatori (2007).

29. At the upcoming BHC-EBHA joint conference to be held at Bocconi University (June 2009) there will be three sessions dedicated to the issue of social responsibility of companies.

together with others, like that of gender, another enormous field of research³⁰. Gender is a social construction that we are starting to understand only recently and I am sure it is going to be researched more and more systematically. In my earlier comments I reported the positions of Scranton and Lipartito on these topics. They indicate as an example of cultural business history the essay of Daniel Robinson on the marketing of Wrigley Chewing Gum. Robinson was effectively able to use semiotics to explain the success and behavior of the US company³¹. Another essay mentioned by Scranton in a recent lecture he gave at Bocconi was Per Hansen's article on the behavior of Danish savings banks in the Seventies when they refused to be merged with major commercial banks. This occurred because they were subjected to a kind of "narrative" (i.e., a well embedded culture) that prevented them from even considering that the "common people's banks" should be united with other institutions representing a sort of predatory capitalism³². Finally in this field I want to mention a group of researchers based in Holland who, under the label "tensions of Europe", are trying to understand the process of European unity in a bottom-up process that brings together technology and culture³³.

2.4 Entrepreneurship

This is a topic that cuts across the three mentioned earlier, in the sense that it's present in each of them. Think for instance of the role played by entrepreneurs in social responsibility. Entrepreneurship is an issue that has attracted attention in the past twenty years, also given the crisis of the old Chandlerian firm. Entrepreneurs include people involved in major restructurings of the American economy (such as Jack Welch at General Electric) but, above all, those who led the electronic age transformation (including Bill Gates and Steve Jobs). But entrepreneurship (and entrepreneurs) is a difficult concept to grasp because it appears in various sizes and forms. An entrepreneur can be the Schumpeterian hero but he or she can also be an ordinary person. The entrepreneur might be the one who risks his own money or maybe the manager who allocates company resources at the highest level. For sure, a category of entrepreneurship is that of innovation but so is alertness or the ability to sense the disequilibrium of the market. So, in many respects, the British scholar, Mark Casson, is right when he points out that entrepreneurship means different things for different historians. We have the same difficulty when trying to separate the entrepreneur from his own environment. We all know that it is very difficult to create good generals in peaceful times so again William Baumol is also right when he points out that the entrepreneur is one of the most intriguing characters of the

30. Gálvez Muñoz (2006).

31. Robinson (2004).

32. Hansen (2007).

33. Schot and Oldenziel (2005).

economic scene³⁴. Even though entrepreneurship is not really a Chandlerian topic, I think that it would be very fruitful to apply to this field Chandler's methodology of wide comparison and sharp focus. In this respect, I think that biographical dictionaries that have been constructed (or are now being assembled) in various countries of Europe can also be very useful. Here in Spain you have the works of Eugenio Torres, Javier Vidal and Francesc Cabana and colleagues³⁵. Also, more than 20 years ago we had important works in this field in the UK³⁶. In Italy, even if the dictionary project was suspended by the publishing house for budgetary reasons, there are 600 entries on entrepreneurs operating across the nation from Unification up to 2000 which have already been prepared³⁷. France is starting a project now which will be a wide and solid dictionary of entrepreneurs and rather similar to the Italian formula. If we examine these dictionary entries with very precise and similar criteria (such as their social origins, their educational backgrounds, the incidents which brought them to entrepreneurial activity, the strategy and structure that they performed, their relationship with the social environment and politics and similar issues), I think that we can get to a much better comprehension of such a proteian but decisive phenomenon for modern economies.

3. Scientific and academic alliances

I would like to remember that the well-known Italian economic historian, Carlo Cipolla, at the end of a very productive career as a scholar decided to leave us a precious book of methodology in which—to characterize his field—he used the expression “between two cultures”, meaning that economic history was in between two very important areas of study (economics and history)³⁸. If it is possible, business history is an even more complicated plight since here the cultures are THREE! In addition to the two mentioned by Cipolla, we add managerial sciences. It is also a sort of practical matter because for us it means deciding which academic alliance and so location we are going to choose. Are we going to favor the department of economics or a management department or a department of humanities?

34. Amatori (2006)

35. See, for example, Cabana (2006), Torres Villanueva (2000); Vidal (2005).

36. Jeremy (1984-1986)

37. The Dictionary of Italian Entrepreneurs (Amatori and Caravale, eds.) is a publication of the Italian Encyclopedia and has been structured on the basis of three volumes with 1000 entries.

38. Cipolla (1988)

3.1 *Economists*

Given a hypothetical possibility of choice I think that as to our relationship with the economists, business historians tend to resist being in their company given the unrealistic hypothesis of the neo-classical theory on human psychology and attitudes in the economic scenario. It is well known that, in the pure neoclassical theory, firms do not need entrepreneurs who take risky decisions or complex interactions among the various social components. They are entities ruled by impersonal mechanisms which aim to get marginal revenue equal to marginal costs. Business historians claim that such economic theory is totally useless for understanding economic change and the process of innovation and growth. Nevertheless, it is difficult to sustain that today even the so-called mainstream economics has not developed new positions more apt to explain in realistic terms human attitudes, singularly and in organizations. In a recent essay³⁹, this argument is vigorously sustained by three scholars— Naomi Lamoreaux, Dan Raff, and Peter Temin—who have given us many contributions on this subject, trying to arrive at a new synthesis in business history given the most recent theoretical acquisitions of economic theory⁴⁰. They are convinced that the use of economic tools can contribute to overcome what in their opinion is one of the weakest points of Chandlerian historiography—its tendency to be a Whig-ish history (meaning a history “optimistic” in which from the start you know how it will end)⁴¹. For instance, the agency theory is very useful to understand the complex relationship in a large corporation between a scattered ownership (the principal) and the managers (the agents) who, without any risk, are going to govern the company on behalf of the former. Even more useful in their opinion is the game theory that considers the interactions between the economic actors and the way the final result comes out. Particularly effective for the research is the principle of backward induction that envisions players able to anticipate what will happen at later stages of the game and consequently make their initial choices. A third major body of theory that is useful to business historians is the economics of transaction costs as has been pioneered by Oliver Williamson who shifted from the orthodox economic theory to focus more on the individual transactions rather than on the equilibrium of supply and demand. He rejected the neoclassical assumption of perfect information to talk about freeriding and bounded rationality. On the other hand it is well-known how close was the relationship he enjoyed with Chandler, even if it turned adversarial at times.

But, again, business historians resist falling into the arms of economists, first

39. Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin (2008).

40. See, for example, Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin (2003).

41. Idem (2004).

of all because it is difficult for them to understand their language. In a very interesting paper entitled “Are Business Historians Quantitatively Illiterate?” by three Finns (Eloranta, Ojala, and Valtonen) presented last summer at the annual meeting of the European Business History Association, the authors give the results of a well done survey on issues of *Business History Review* and *Business History* published during the decade 1990-2000. Our Finnish colleagues discovered that most business historians are capable of using charts, tables, percentages or even descriptive statistics but very very seldom do they opt for more sophisticated methods ranging from correlations to regressions and simulation techniques⁴². In their essay, Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin, too, have to recognize that business historians so far have rarely set up formal models or been engaged in explicit hypothesis testing. According to these three scholars, the objection of business historians is that economics is very good at modeling the measures selected by business people to decide among alternative courses of action, whether this is related to price signaling in the market or to the effect of different organizational arrangements on transaction costs. But the business historians claim that all these conceptual theories are not very good at shedding light on where these alternatives come from in explaining how individuals, firms, and organizations innovate and develop new capabilities over time⁴³.

In this respect, it is interesting to remember the strong way Chandler wanted to differentiate himself from Williamson. For the Harvard historian, while Williamson’s unit of analysis is the transaction, his was the firm with all its resources, material and intangible⁴⁴. So far, among business historians it doesn’t seem that there has been a great resounding of the Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin invocation that nowadays mainstream economics provides a wide array of tools that are well-suited to give more depth to business history. These tools range from the evaluation of a counterfactual hypothesis to the techniques of backward induction, an ensemble of methodologies which make it possible to consider alternatives that were never considered; all this would be greatly beneficial for business history.

3.2 *Management scholars*

Paradoxical has been, on the other hand, the relationship with students of management with whom there was a great start in 1962 with the publication of *Strategy and Structure*. The book had an enormous impact and practically determined the foundations of the study of strategy. But the contribution of

42. Eloranta, Ojala and Valtonin, paper presented at the European Business History Association Conference on Transactions and Interactions: The Flow of Goods, Services, and Information, Bergen, 21-23 August (2008).

43. Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin, (2008), p. 52

44. Chandler (1992).

Chandler was not only for the field of strategy. With his successive studies (in particular *Scale and Scope*), Chandler was decisive for the topic of organizational resources and capabilities. In this way he contributed to the theory of the resource-based view of the firm. Next to this, another powerful current has taken place in management disciplines, a current that ended up in hegemonizing this kind of studies. Its goal is the scientization of the field with its purpose of building a science of management or administrative sciences that would essentially emulate the natural science model. In this way, history has been emarginated, even in Europe where research was more inclined to consider the process of change and adopt the qualitative case study methods. To this result business historians have largely contributed. First, by being too much inclined, despite Chandler's examples, to provide narrative histories of companies, entrepreneurs, and industries; in this way, much of the literature of business history insisted on the singularity of the events described, refusing possible generalizations that are indispensable to management scholars. Secondly, even the business historian following more the Chandlerian example of comparison and generalization seems to be more inclined to lean towards the evolutionary economists, a very interesting— but clearly minority—ally. It is true that in the relationship with management students business historians have their own “Indian reservations”, fields in which their contributions have been really important as in international business or of course management history that includes the transformation of production systems, the American influence on the development on European and Japanese companies, and the evolution and role of management education and consulting⁴⁵.

But apparently this is not enough. There is today a pressure that business historians return to the very heart of Chandlerian experience, the study of strategy. This, for instance, is the warm request by a strategy scholar, Richard Whittington, who in a recent essay asks for the help of business historians in order to make more efficient and realistic a field—that of strategy—which otherwise risks being dominated by econometricians. To the business historians Whittington asks not only to supply management scholars with rigorous data (something that they currently do not use often) but also the Chandlerian capacity to theorize, building in this way a relationship with the management scientists on an equal basis⁴⁶.

3.3 *Historians*

Finally, a few words about business history as history. What does it mean to be an historian in the field of business studies? First of all, it means focusing on change over a long period of time (and this is true even when we are focusing on

45. Kipping and Usdiken (2008).

46. Whittington (2008).

relatively recent phenomenon if we want to put them in a real historical perspective). Second, even if the firm is our unit of analysis, this actor has to be put in a wider context: political, economical, technological, social, cultural, institutional. This means that the object of our studies cannot be insulated in an abstract emptiness. Third, on this basis, we have to talk of relevant phenomenon, meaning something that gets out of technicalities and goes beyond our immediate discipline to address a wider audience. If (à la Chandler) we study the relationships between corporate strategy and structure in several countries—a field of studies that, thanks to the work of Whittington and Mayer mentioned earlier, today is experiencing a revival in Europe, it will be important to know if diversification is more or less correlated, if the firm is a conglomerate, a holding or a multidivisional. But, more importantly, we'll want to understand how all of this happens within the context of a specific nation. What does organizational change mean for large corporations at a certain level of a country's economic development? How is power reallocated within a firm and, from there, within a society? What role does institutional or legislative evolution play in all this? What kind of managerial class will emerge? What type of political class? If we don't pose these questions to ourselves, our research risks becoming a sterile academic exercise. Fourth, keep in mind the wide and critical use of sources; as historians we cannot be happy with secondary sources. We have to go into archives and get our hands dirty. We have to undertake a very time-consuming work but it still is not enough. We also have to be critical of the documents we find and compare them to other sources, with secondary sources, with the so-called gray literature, with oral histories and we have to understand if these sources are adequate to respond to the problems that we think are most important for our research. In the end, we face a very difficult and laborious task. Fifth, we need to know theories but they have to be adequate to the questions which we feel are important. We must master theories, not become their prisoners⁴⁷.

In an ideal world, certainly the best would be to be fully in command of the three cultures (economics, managerial studies, and history) and capable of moving without friction between a department of economics and that of management or humanities. I am afraid that for my generation, probably very, very few scholars are able to do this (and I'll admit that I am not one!) but we must indicate this way to our younger colleagues from whom we should pretend lots of hard work based on reading tons of literature and searching many archives. But we will also need to concede the most ample freedom to single out objectives and methods of research, remembering always that business history has a crucial role in comprehending the major changes of our epoch.

47. Amatori (forthcoming March 2009).

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Business History: State of the Art and Controversies

ABSTRACT

At present business history seems to be in very good health (numbers of journals, associations and papers submitted in international conferences). Everybody uses an adjective to define the present phase: “post-Chandlerian”. The author is not at all convinced that Chandler’s framework should be totally abandoned, if we render it more flexible. However, we now have to go beyond Chandler. Four directions of research seem to be particularly fruitful: the study of the N-Form; the historical perspective of globalization; issues related to the relationship between enterprise, society and culture; and entrepreneurship. In relation to scientific and academic alliances, the best would be to be fully in command of economics, managerial studies, and history, and capable of moving without friction between a department of economics and that of management or humanities. We will also need to concede the most ample freedom to single out objectives and methods of research, remembering always that business history has a crucial role in comprehending the major changes of our epoch.

KEY WORDS: Business History, Managerial Studies, Economic History.

Historia de la empresa: estado de la cuestión y controversias

RESUMEN

En la actualidad la historia de la empresa goza de buena salud (número de revistas, asociaciones y contribuciones a congresos internacionales). Todo el mundo usa un adjetivo para definir el momento presente: “post-chandleriano”. El autor no cree que el marco interpretativo de Chandler deba ser totalmente abandonado, si se flexibiliza. Sin embargo, hay que ir más allá de Chandler. Cuatro líneas de investigación parecen particularmente fructíferas: el estudio de la Forma N; la perspectiva histórica de la globalización, las relaciones entre empresa, sociedad y cultura; y la “entrepreneurship”. Respecto a las alianzas científicas y académicas, lo mejor sería un completo dominio de la economía, los estudios de “management” y la historia, y ser capaces de moverse sin fricciones entre los departamento de economía y los de “management” o humanidades. Tenemos que conceder total libertad para identificar objetivos y métodos de investigación, recordando siempre que la historia de la empresa tiene un papel crucial en la comprensión de los grandes cambios de nuestra época.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Historia de la empresa, Estudios de “management”, Historia económica.

