



What is a Business Civilization?

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What is a business civilization? Do we live in one? Would we want to? The phrase suggests a specific, overwhelming degree of dominion by business; a civilization organized around not religion, kingship, ethnicity, nationality, or democracy but around business as its principal, foundational institution – the heart of its culture, understood as a web of meanings, symbols, values, priorities and structured relationships (you will soon realize that I am taking civilization and culture as closely synonymous terms). Civil society and its institutions, of governance and justice, official and voluntary, would be secondary to business and its institutions, primarily the business corporation itself. Nation states and national borders would become insubstantial to the point of being meaningless or invisible. Class structures would be flattened and simplified to the extent that they consist only of two groups; business leaders and the rest. We would be able to observe a far penetrating marketization of not only productive relations and processes but also of those in the social and cultural realms. Not only would business predominate, in an institutional sense, over traditional authorities, such as kingship, religion, or democracy, but it would also occupy their once primary position as a source of meaning and value in peoples’ lives: in their emotional lives; in their most inward lives, in their souls even. Where Roland Marchand went in search of the soul of the corporation perhaps we should now be seeking after a corporatization of the human soul? In other words, in a business civilization, business, its activities and outputs, its values and priorities, would satisfy not only our material and cultural needs but would also satisfy also our desire for stability in the polity and order in society, and it would provide the structures and, even more importantly, the evaluative systems within which our emotional and

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spiritual needs were in turn met. It would structure all the choices we make and determine our ethics, built around a reoriented set of rights and responsibilities – those that served the ends of business. We would turn first and always to business in search of solutions for whatever problems we faced, at both a global and an individual scale. It would be a totalizing institution – and perhaps also a totalizing unitary culture, something far more radical than the cozy corporatism of the consensual decades of the 1950s and 1960s. To echo this conference’s call for papers, if in 1931 James Truslow Adams could characterize the United States as a “business civilization,” in which “most of the energy, ability, and ambition of the country has found its outlet, if not its satisfaction, in business” then perhaps today business does, at last, account even for our satisfactions?¹ This would be a remarkable outcome: sanctification of a once profane institution – the business firm – originally forged from Weberian rationality and secularism.

Have we reached that point at any place in the world, today or in the past? Robert L. Heilbroner must have thought so as he was warning of *Business Civilization in Decline* as early as 1976, arguing that one day we would gaze on the ruins of industry as we now gaze on those of Machu Picchu.² Today, there are probably few who share Heilbroner’s concerns for the health of business civilization, concerns forged during the “stagflation” of the mid-1970s. In fact, the view that a business civilization is in the process of being formed is a commonplace. For example, on Wednesday March 8th 2017 commentator ‘sbmfc’ added the following comment to a review, written by Richard J. Evans and published in *The Guardian*, of Timothy Snyder’s new book *On Tyranny*:

Is what we call democracy really so valuable? We live in a Corpocracy and to pretend that any vote cast in the past 20 years has any major influence on the nature of our political system is ridiculous. We have two parties composed of professional politicians competing with each other to implement the same corporate policy.

Citizens such as ‘sbmfc’ might point to the sheer size of many business organizations, noting that some of them, individually, are much larger than many national economies; they might point to the notorious ability of business to capture weak or dependent governments and politicians; likewise they might point to the rise of corporate lobbyists and to the revolving door between government and business; they might point to penetration of business into realms of social provision – education, health, criminal justice, and others – once seen as the preserve (at least for a time) of the state and the public sector; they might point to the marketization of the provision of almost every type of goods and service we can imagine, and of those of which we have not yet thought; they might point to a pervasive discourse of enterprise that argues we all must follow an imperative to become entrepreneurs. They might point to how business can provide the basis for community, as it does at the “census designated place” (in the official parlance) of Celebration, Florida. They might also point to the loosening and erosion of previous social and cultural bonds, links, commonalities, and continuities; for the individual set free from these older structures, especially those of class and nation, is more fully available to business, whether as consumer or employee. Some might even welcome these developments, a just and proper end to human history, much as others decry them. One might even see in the administration of the 45th president of the United States evidence that a business civilization has been wrought from the

¹ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (1931), quoted in the Call for Papers for the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Business History Conference; <http://www.thebhc.org/2017-call-papers>

² Robert L. Heilbroner, *Business Civilization in Decline* (New York: Norton and Co., 1976).

wreckage of history (even as his confused populism contains or allows for strong strains of anti-corporatism).

The subtlest but most important signs might be found in the texture of daily life, in our routine interactions with businesses and how they shape our experience of living, give it purpose and mold the meaning we derive from it. In January 2015, in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania, a small local soda firm, just shy of 100 years old and employing about 40 staff, abruptly closed. On social media a sense almost of grief held sway – though the event probably went unnoticed any further than 30 miles away from its epicenter. In a wave of reminiscence I cannot refrain from calling Proustian, sensual and emotional memories poured forth. For many contributing to the reaction it seemed as though a prop that had helped – and continued to help – make sense of life and how it had been lived had been kicked away. This brand was tightly interwoven with and almost inseparable from how time and its passing was measured through memory, interwoven with notions of family and other intimate relations. Almost inevitably, when the brand was resurrected by another local family enterprise, the same memorialists who had hymned the original incarnation complained that the birch beer flavor no longer tasted the same. Even the past seemed changed, to a tiny degree, by these events in the present. It was an enthralling, puzzling, even moving spectacle; one that spoke to exactly the kinds of penetration of life by business that I have been surveying just above.

I do not believe we yet live in a business civilization and perhaps the visions I have just laid out will always remain a fantasy, or a nightmare – a dystopia worthy of author J.G. Ballard. Business still has to compete with other institutions, other sources of power, other priorities, other evaluations of worth; other sources of meaning; other standards of ethical behavior; even other sources of goods and services. Some scholars go so far as to claim to detect a “re-enchantment” of the world, steering us back toward pre-industrial ways of thinking, believing, and living, including a return to the craft organization of production. Spaces for play – and resistance – are opening up, or were perhaps never entirely closed down. Nonetheless, over the long run, we can perhaps hazard that the direction of travel is clear? How are we to know?

Maybe, in the end, I have been much too stringent in establishing my criteria for what constitutes a business civilization. But even if I have, I still think the exercise useful, for it points toward the kinds of questions we need to ask if we are to be able to address this puzzle of the relationship between business and civilization, the balance between them, and how – and why – that balance has shifted over time and from place to place. It also points to how we will need canvasses simultaneously vast and minute in order to detect both the tectonic shifts and how they are then lived out and experienced in the grain of life. The Call for Papers for this meeting suggests we might explore the question of ‘What has been the influence ... of business values on culture?’ But I believe this is to make the mistake of viewing business values and culture as mutually dependent but essentially separate systems. Business and its values cannot be divorced, analytically or pragmatically, from the culture with which they are inextricably enmeshed. In our analyses we will need to attend to fundamental questions concerning how a civilization or culture places business in relation to: evaluations of the proper purpose and ordering of society, including the proper distribution of power; notions of the sublime, the sacred, and other sources of meaning; how these evaluations and notions are encoded in symbolic, expressive and ethical systems; and how they are in turn embodied in material cultures, as well as in the rites and rituals a culture or civilization habitually performs.

This is what I mean when I say we need to begin to move toward a cultural history of business. It is in such a search that we might find clues as to our movement towards – or retreat from – the creation of a business civilization.