

Business History in France

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The purpose of this survey is to review the current state of business history in France.¹ It will be confined to the most recent work on the 19th and 20th centuries. A similar study by Claude Fohlen described the situation in the mid-1960s [17]. My review does not pretend to be exhaustive: it will attempt only to examine the present institutional and archival setting, the Gallic characteristics of this scholarly enterprise, and the most important research trends. Business history will be construed here in a broad sense to include much more than the stories of individual French firms.

In France business history lacks an institutional base. There is no business school which supports it nor are there any positions in the university system committed to it except those which are combined with economic history. The only professional focus is with the association of economic historians which sponsors meetings and publishes a bulletin. The major source of research funds in France, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, provides assistance only indirectly through its grants to economic historians. Since the *Histoire des entreprises* ceased publication in 1963, there is not even a review that specializes in the subject. Two other reviews devoted to heavy industry have also been terminated.² The prestigious Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (now renamed the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) once it stopped publishing the *Histoire des entreprises* has demonstrated little interest in supporting the field. Nor has French business filled the gap. Only in a few cases have private firms sponsored scholarly histories. The iron and steel industry is exceptional in lending its support to the Centre d'Histoire de la Sidérurgie at Nancy. On a comparative basis, it would seem, the funding and institutional support for the field are not as great as in either the United States or Great Britain.

In spite of its anemic institutional condition business history in France is vigorous. It is a small-scale enterprise producing a high-quality product for a rather inelastic market.

The field's dynamism depends on a nucleus of active scholars who hold posts, usually as economic historians, at a few universities. In Paris they cluster at Paris I, Paris IV, Paris VIII (Vincennes), and Paris X (Nanterre), while outside the capital they tend to gravitate to universities in industrial settings, especially those in Lyon and Lille. The fortunes of business history thus continue to remain in the hands of a relatively small number of eminent, independent scholars. The names that most readily come to mind are: Jean Bouvier, François Caron, François Crouzet, Patrick Fridenson, Bertrand Gille, Marcel Gillet, Pierre Léon, and Maurice Lévy-Leboyer. They in turn are training a number of able young researchers. The publications of these historians will be found scattered throughout several major periodicals which cover economic and social history, such as the *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, the *Annales*, *Le Mouvement social*, and the *Revue historique*.

Americans and Canadians have also made substantial contributions to the field though their impact may not compare with that made by the generation of David Landes and Rondo Cameron whose views and controversies stimulated research in the 1950s and 1960s. It may seem as if American interest in modern French history has moved en bloc to the new social history with its focus on demography, the working class, community studies, and popular culture. Yet this massive change in direction in French historical studies has not impeded the steady trickle of publications on business. Among those who have made noteworthy contributions in the last decade are: Reed Geiger [22], Charles Kindleberger [37], David Landes [40 and 41], James Laux [43], John McKay [46 and 47], and Michael Smith [63]. There are also several unpublished doctoral theses of real merit, by Gareth Dyas [14], Martin Fine [15], Michael Miller [49], Henry Peiter [56], and Michael Rust [61]. In addition, the writing of Canadians such as C. R. Day [13], John Godfrey [28], and John Sherwood [62] deserve mention.

Research into French business history continues to face serious archival obstacles. Since the exemplary effort made by Bertrand Gille immediately after World War II in collecting business papers and depositing them at the Archives Nationales, there has been negligible progress in systematically improving the holdings available to scholars [4]. Most company and trade association records remain in private hands and the French businessman's reputation for secrecy has not changed much when it comes to releasing private papers, no matter how old they may be. Archival conservation has become an ever more pressing problem, since the Archives Nationales has exhausted its space and has left the preservation of business materials in private hands [52]. Nevertheless, the situation seems to be improving. In many instances researchers have been able to gain access to important hoards of company records. In some cases where firms were nationalized,

such as electric power, the Nord railway, and the Renault Company, their archives have in theory fallen into the public domain. But these records may be in the hands of autonomous public enterprises or dispersed in various departmental archives. Moreover, the cataloging of these records is still not complete. A most promising development is the gradual relaxation of restrictions on public archives for the recent past. The archives of the ministries of finance, commerce, and industry, public works, labor, and certain other agencies contain voluminous, and often precious, materials for historians of business. On the whole the possibilities for research in the field are better now than they have ever been, although it remains a relatively difficult area of inquiry for historians.

The method for investigating business history continues to be traditional empiricism and archival digging. There is no trace of the counterfactual new economic history in French studies. Nor is there any theorizing about the firm or about the role of the entrepreneur which Americans seem to pursue so earnestly. There is, however, a growing application of microeconomic theory. Even though holistic studies of modern firms tend to exceed the capacity of the single investigator, collaborative research has not made much progress. The biographical approach emphasizing the qualities of entrepreneurship seems out of fashion: indeed, the French, unlike the British or the Americans, have never been captivated by this type of inquiry. What is more characteristic of French methodology is an emphasis on statistical analysis [2]. Many business historians are intellectually rooted in a rich national tradition of economic statisticians that dates back to François Simiand. Accordingly business and quantitative economic history often overlap and reinforce one another. The last decade has seen an impressive accumulation of documentation on long-term economic indexes such as prices, profits, and mergers, which complement business research. A guide to this statistical data has recently been published [34].

The practice of business history in France exhibits some peculiar characteristics. French researchers rarely think of themselves as business historians per se; they view themselves as economic, or even socio-economic, historians who emphasize enterprise and entrepreneurs as part of their attempt at explaining the overall course and dynamics of their country's development [1]. This seems to contrast with much of the work done in the United States and Britain. It may also be a source of strength, since it keeps the relationship between individual enterprise, the economy, and society at the focus of analysis. A splendid example of how business historians have integrated their findings in a general history are the essays by Pierre Léon and Maurice Lévy-Leboyer in a new survey of the economic and social history of France which promises to become the standard work in the field [31].

A second noteworthy characteristic is the distinct political taste to what the French serve as business history. A recent biography of François de Wendel [35], for example, a major steel-maker turned parliamentarian, virtually ignores his business career. This Gallic idiosyncrasy is due to a number of causes. It derives from the strongly interventionist style of the French state and to a long history of businessmen's ambiguous response to its steady encroachment. The highly ideological atmosphere which envelops the study of French capitalism, especially at the point of intersection between business and politics, further contributes to politicizing business history. This latter theme is also available to researchers who have no training in economics. Furthermore, government records are on the whole more accessible than private business archives, for the 19th century research has brought a number of state activities to the attention of historians. These include tariff and colonial policies; technical education; government regulation of business, for example, joint stock companies; and defense spending. François Crouzet, for example, has demonstrated how the state inspired the creation of a private armaments industry after 1870 [11]. In the 20th century as public enterprise expanded and governments adopted the practice of economic management as symbolized by planning, business history became even more closely linked to the state and public policy.

The problem of relative French economic retardation and the related issue of entrepreneurial responsibility which once preoccupied business and economic historians has receded. It was generated by a collective sense of backwardness among the French which peaked after the Second World War. American perceptions of what we considered was a stagnant economy in the 1950s also prompted it. This perception gave rise to the notion of entrepreneurial failure and the charge of "Malthusian" business practices. Recent work, however, on per capita growth rates in the 19th century has modified the former stern indictment of French economic performance. The rapid expansion of the economy in the past 25 years has further served to raise our assessment of long-term economic development. Economic retardation and entrepreneurial failure have suffered a corresponding loss of attention. In fact the proponents of this view in France, as in Britain, are on the defensive.³ The trend has been to identify more and more examples of dynamic entrepreneurship, as James Laux has done for the French automobile industry before 1914 [43]. Scholars have been able to document the persistence of the Saint-Simonian tradition among managers of big business even through the "dark ages" of the 1930s and early 1940s. One can also discern an increasing recognition of the "objective" or impersonal obstacles to industrial growth in 19th-century France. A small, volatile domestic market, high transportation costs, poor coal seams, and other such

hard facts have relieved the burden once borne by entrepreneurs without going so far as to reverse the earlier appraisal. In retrospect it seems as if the French were never much interested in the issue of entrepreneurial failure except for the purpose of refuting American charges.

The prevailing trend in business history has been away from issues such as retardation and entrepreneurial failure toward what might be loosely termed a strategy and structure approach. This development is not so advanced as that found in the work of Alfred Chandler, Jr., where the focus is on the organization of the modern corporation's functions [9]. Yet the French version of this approach does look toward the structure of industry and firms and toward company strategies. It also seeks to demonstrate how market conditions and other external factors conditioned the behavior of businessmen. The tendency has been to omit personalities from company histories leaving the entrepreneur as a rational, but rather passive, profit-maximizer. In Patrick Fridenson's study of the Renault automobile company [18], for example, the autocratic, owner-director Louis Renault almost disappears from view. In his place Fridenson puts a dynamic *grande entreprise*. The Renault company developed out of a small artisan assembly shop into an enormous vertically integrated, diversified manufacturer. Yet it still, as Fridenson contends, never quite lived up to its promise as a model enterprise either in structure or strategy. An even more extreme example of this trend is the study of François Caron in which the story of the Nord railway becomes the history of prices and costs [5]. One might detect the influence of neoclassical economics as well as the work of Alfred Chandler in this research.

To my mind the most important attempt at recasting business history in France along these new lines is an essay by Maurice Lévy-Leboyer entitled, "Innovation and Business Strategies in 19th and 20th Century France" [45]. Lévy-Leboyer suggests historians stop worrying about what was "wrong" with French business practices and inquire how businessmen responded and adapted to their economic environment usually, he believes, with considerable success. He postulates a persistent structural dualism in France in which a substantial sector of small- and medium-sized firms coexisted with big business. Rather than censuring the former as agents of retardation, he explains their durability as a rational response to fragmented and dispersed markets, a surfeit of skilled manpower, labor-intensive manufactures, and high transportation costs. At the same time, Lévy-Leboyer argues, large-scale enterprises developed, especially after 1890, which were comparable in size, technological endowment, organizational structure, and business strategy with those in other countries. Furthermore, "over a long span," he writes, "one finds that there were very few growth potentials that big business failed to exploit" [45, p. 127]. The extreme structural

dualism that endured in France well into the 20th century Lévy-Leboyer attributes not to any deficiency in entrepreneurial abilities, but to external factors such as demographic stagnation, slow urbanization, and the interference of events such as war which interrupted upswings in the business cycle. He wants, in brief, to discard the Malthusian stereotype that was derived from the 19th century family firm in the textile industry and reformulate our conception of the whole context of modern business history.

One can see the influence of a strategy and structure approach in the attention given in recent work to firm size, the nature of the market, relations among firms and with public authorities, and marketing and production strategies [14 and 68]. Marcel Gillet's study of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais coal fields, for example, stresses such issues [26]. François Caron has given us an overview of the long-range shift in company investment and market strategies [6]. He begins with the 19th century style of self-financing and limited product diversification which was, he says, followed in the early 20th century by vertical integration and specialization. The latest pattern, according to Caron, is the giant, diversified enterprise, funded externally, planning long-term investments, and competing in global markets. The structural interest has also led to research on cartels or *ententes* as the French preferred to call them [26 and 61]. It may turn out that cartels were an early form of industrial concentration in France and that they were less restrictive than once believed. Both in coal and steel they appeared during periods of expansion and as aids for foreign marketing.

Strategy and structure aside, what are, one might ask, the new research areas in business history at the substantive level? There is clearly an emphasis on industry rather than other types of business. Automobiles [18, 19, 20, 43, and 50], metals [25, 36, and 67], electric power [39, 51, 53, and 59], mining [22, 26, and 27], and petroleum [33, 39, and 55], but not textiles ([41 and 64] are exceptions) which formerly cornered the market, have been the subject of company histories or industry studies which feature the individual enterprise. Somewhat less work has been published on agricultural processing, armaments, aviation, chemicals, machine manufacturing, and such semiartisan industries as watchmaking. Aside from a few important items on railways [5] and urban trolleys [47], little has appeared on the transportation industry and even less on retail trade. There have been virtually no recent studies on the operation of public enterprise, but the improving archival situation for this sector promises more in the future. There has been a corresponding decline in banking history which was predominant in the 1950s and early 1960s with allowances made for some notable exceptions [23 and 24], such as Jean Bouvier's remarkable synthesis [3]. a considerable amount of new scholarship has selected a regional

setting. The Lyon region in particular has been the center for major research [8]. In addition, one can find information on business embedded in general local or regional histories for which the French are justly famous; for example, [65].

Another field of current interest is what might be called the ideology of business, that is the wider economic, social, and even political roles and views of businessmen. William Hoisington [32] and Patrick Fridenson [19 and 21] have written on business ideology between the wars and some of my work sets forth the views of reform-minded managers drawn largely from big business in the 20th century [38 and 39]. One area that has been especially well explored is that of employers' associations and their politics [15, 16, 54, 56, 57, and 61]. Yet the subject of paternalism, aside from Henri Hatzfeld's work [30], which was the dominant mode of employer ideology in the 19th century has yet to find its historian.

An aspect of business history which has attracted lively interest is the social background of entrepreneurs especially with respect to their education and training. This research has in part been stimulated by the scholarly activity in the adjacent field of educational history. Engineers, in particular, are the subject of current research [45]. In a recent essay Charles Kindleberger has demonstrated the long tradition of scientific and technical training for French entrepreneurs and argued that as the technological element of economic growth advances French business will be at an advantage [37]. One cannot omit from a survey of the social context of French entrepreneurship the superb study of Adeline Daumard on the Parisian bourgeoisie during the early 19th century [12].

Yet another new dimension of business history has been the study of international economic relations. Jean Bouvier pioneered this field with his articles in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some scholars have tied business interests with French diplomacy [60]. Other historians have continued to explore French foreign investments [46]. A branch of this research, which has caught the fancy of young historians, has been the study of French enterprises in the colonies [10 and 48]. The investigation of the origins of global or multinational enterprises, however, has barely begun.

A persistent weakness of the French school of business history has been to slight the firm's employees and its production techniques. But this oversight is in the process of being rectified. There have been articles on Taylorism [54], on the Rationalization movement between the wars [29, and Michelle Perrot [58] has explored the problem of industrial technology and the work force. The burgeoning field of social history has supplemented this research. Roland Treppe [66], for example, has explained how mine owners in central France during the 19th cen-

tury slowly fabricated a dependable work force out of peasant recruits.

Business history in France then has its own peculiarities, its own strengths, and weaknesses. Despite its small scale, it offers instructive contrasts in its operations, orientations, and substantive findings. Certainly the close rapport between business history and economic and social history has been beneficial to French scholarship and offers a model to all practitioners of the trade.

NOTES

1. I wish to express my gratitude to Professors Patrick Fridenson, Michael Smith, and James Laux for their advice in preparing this review. For the most up-to-date bibliography on French economic history for the period 1870-1940 see [42].

2. *Revue d'histoire de la sidérurgie* (1960-68); *Revue d'histoire des mines et de la métallurgie* (1969-72).

3. The pioneers of the entrepreneurial failure school such as David Landes have not retreated. In his latest work Landes [40 and 41] continues to stress the human and cultural determinants of growth.

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